Towards the Sun

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	Works of the World, Best ALTA Fics ((ฉ(´ᴗ`)ง)), Curated Curios (with rec notes in the bookmarks), Ladybird's Small Fandoms, Fics with prominent female characters., WIPs I am Keeping An Eye On, the peanut butter to my jelly, Fandom Trumps Hate 2025
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Towards the Sun

by MuffinLance

Summary

Zuko botches his escape on the day of the eclipse and sits out the war in prison. What will the Gaang do with a new Fire Lord they can't trust? Season Four "Zuko never joined the Gaang, and he's really bad at being good" AU.

Featuring Azula's extended field trip, Jun not signing up for this, and Sokka's increasing desire to scream. Come get your international politics with a side of baby dragons.

Podfic and German translation now available, see chapter one notes!

Notes

Podfic by Sephone_North (chapters 1-6)
[Podfic] Towards the Sun by FaerieFey13 (chapters 7+)

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Deutsch available: Der Sonne zugewandt - Towards the Sun - Deutsche Übersetzung by TitanicEnte

Chapter 1: Fire Lord

They let Zuko out of his cell because the world was ending. *The Fire Lord was defeated,* the guards told him, even though the Fire Lord was here just this morning. Tall and strong, alive, gloating one more time on his way to burn the Earth Kingdom down.

That was yesterday, they told him. It wasn't the worst slip of time he'd had, and it didn't make their words any more believable.

"How?" His voice was raspier than usual. They hadn't brought him water when they came. One of the guards cringed like he expected to be lit on fire for this oversight, which told Zuko everything he needed to know about their expectations for him. They let him out anyway. This told him something else.

It was the Avatar, of course. Somewhere over in the Earth Kingdom, and reports were conflicted on whether Ozai was dead or a prisoner or something inexplicably worse, but he was definitely *defeated.*

His father had been defeated, and his fourteen-year-old sister was—was banishing everyone, was *insane,* she hadn't killed anyone (yet) but it wasn't for lack of trying. They'd abandoned a whole wing of the palace to her—

No one had given the order to set him free, Zuko realized. No one *wanted* him; they just needed him. This took him longer than it should have to understand, but the guards were speaking so fast and no one had really talked to him in weeks, and—and he stopped at the prison entrance, and didn't hear anything for a while.

He hadn't seen the sun in weeks, either.

"Your Highness?" one of the guards tried on for size. Tried again: "...Your Majesty?"

Fire Lord Ozai was defeated. Fire Lord Azula was insane. Fire Lord Zuko was crowned by sunset, the nation's fallback heir.

Chapter 2: War Council

Chapter Notes

Potential trigger warning for this chapter, per reader request: "depression and suicidal ideation."

They estimated two months at the earliest until the allied forces of Water and Earth could be on their shores again in any appreciable numbers. Four or five if they got lucky, and the typhoons started early enough to protect them. The Divine Winds had destroyed fleets in the past, but Zuko didn't think they could count on the spirits of ocean and air to favor them this time.

The war can still be won, they told him.

"Why?" he blurted out, because he'd only been out of that cell for fourteen hours and he hadn't slept in—in awhile (bathing seemed more important than sleeping, and he would stand by that decision if it was the last he ever made). "What was ever the point? There's not even anything *in* Ba Sing Se except for a million starving refugees." Personal experience. "They took it back, let them have it. We need to…" No one was challenging him, no one was trying to kick him out. So he kept talking. He never did know when to shut up in war councils. "We need to consolidate power at the colonies, and the blockade. We already *have* the parts of the Earth Kingdom we wanted, we've had them for fifty years. The mines and the refineries and—" and still no one was interrupting him, it even looked like they were *listening,* so of course it was getting harder and harder to string words together coherently. "We… we already won the war. A long time ago. Now we need to not *lose."*

He had attended one war council in his life; now he was taking three meals a day around that table and he and the senior ministers were going through a fiefdom's worth of candles at night, and he was waking up with troop movements inked backwards on his cheek.

And—and people were listening. To him. At first it was because so many ranking officers were on the destroyed airship fleet or were still out in the field, because in the shock of air rushing into that power vacuum they were startled to remember Ozai's other child. But then the first field commanders reported in, the Admirals of the Northern and Eastern fleets and

the Generals of Omashu and Gaoling and Ba Sing Se, and people were still listening. He wasn't really sure why. He wasn't insane or incapacitated, so those were points in his favor. But everyone knew he'd confronted Ozai on the Day of Black Sun, they knew he was three feet and a pathetic failing of determination shy of assassinating their preferred Fire Lord with the man's own lightning, there was no way they actually wanted to listen to him.

Probably they were just sorting out the power dynamics between themselves. Getting their factions together. They would overthrow him when they were good and ready, put him back in his cell where he could get some real sleep or execute him and then he wouldn't be tired anymore. Until then, he'd just keep… being Fire Lord. And he'd put everything he had into it, because he didn't know how to do anything less.

It never occurred to him that he'd seen more of the seas than both his Admirals combined, fought against both halves of the Water Tribe. That when he looked into the Northern Admiral's eyes and the man looked into his they both saw bodies floating on the waves. It was something you had to be there to understand, to comprehend, and Zuko *had* been*,* and when the Northern Admiral insisted that they consider the possibility of spirit involvement in any future Avatar-related battles and the Generals laughed at him for it, their new Fire Lord went on his first tirade since those no-name guards decided to let him out of prison.

He apologized for it once he got a grip on himself, which was as good a place as any to break for lunch because by the looks on their faces he thought he just broke them. Not with the yelling. With the apologizing.

Well. They'd already known he was weak, so whatever.

As they planned troop withdrawals back to the colonies and the mainland, it never occurred to him that he didn't just know every port along the enemy's coast, he knew how many slips at their docks could fit which classes of Fire Navy ships and which nominally Earth harbors might be willing to look the other way if troops were being *onloaded* instead of *offloaded.* That he casually named Earth Kingdom towns that weren't on his Generals' maps, and complained about terrain features he'd had to personally *walk.* The Si Wong desert knew ten thousand ways to get sand in your eyes, and they were *not* sending a division marching through it as a shortcut, *have you ever tried doing double-time through a dry boiling sea full of thieving sandbenders, General Waido? It's faster to go around.*

It never occurred to him that he was sitting at the head of the council table, not behind a curtain of flames. Or that as much as they were listening to him, he was listening to *them.*

Two months at the earliest, his advisors had forecast, so of course it was one month and twenty-seven days later that the bison landed in his courtyard. The part of him that had been reviewing military resources in his dreams thought *actually that's not the worst move ever, it's not like we have air support to stop them from leaving again if this goes wrong and a small strike force of overpowered benders can do as much damage as an army, especially in the middle of our capital, no wonder Sozin hated airbenders—*

He didn't *want* to fight the stupid monk and his underage entourage. He… he'd wanted to join them. (How was that ever supposed to work? He'd had his swords and supplies and a war balloon hidden just outside the city, but he'd never had a *plan.)* This wasn't how he wanted to meet them again. (Dressed like his father, who they already defeated. Not that the person under the clothes was any better, they hated him, he knew they hated him—)

His mouth was already turning down into a scowl. It was a natural reaction. "Avatar." And he couldn't think of anything else to add, because *do you think we could have been friends d*idn't seem like an appropriate follow-up.

All four nations were aboard: Air, Water, Earth. Fire stepped down last, and willingly met his eyes for the first time since Ba Sing Se.

"Uncle," Zuko breathed.

The Dragon of the West looked at the crown in his hair and the military commanders at his back, and still had nothing to say to his wayward nephew.

Well. One thing.

"Fire Lord Zuko."

Not *Zuko.* Not *nephew.* He… deserved that.

Chapter 3: The Most Awkward Family Reunion in the History of Ever

Chapter Notes

> Damnit Sokka this story was supposed to stay Zuko POV, but then you kept ranting in my head. Take your chapter and choke on it, you verbose attention cow-hog. (I love you, Sokka.)

As narrated by Sokka, Warrior of the Southern Water Tribe, Inventor of the Airship Slice, You-May-Have-Heard-of-Him

This was the coldest family reunion Sokka had ever seen. No hugs, no smiles, no excitement, just a lot of side-scowling in Aang's direction from Prince Better-Than-Them, sorry, *Fire Lord* Better-Than-Them. Iroh was trying to play it cool and composed. He had his Wise Old Man face on and his hands tucked in his sleeves and he wasn't running forward to sob into his nephew's shirt which Sokka had been *mildly concerned* would happen. But this was just… worse. So much worse. Sokka could actually see the old guy's heart breaking with every second his nephew wouldn't even look at him, and it was taking all of his willpower not to Sneak Attack his fist into the Prince's—sorry, the *Fire Lord's* face.

And could they please talk about how *Zuko was* the *Fire Lord?* More than they already had, because less-than-two-months was not enough time to process this. He had not just fought a war to play kingmaker for Prince Jerkbender, sorry, *Fire Lord* Jerkbender.

"So how long did you wait to get crowned after we kicked your dad's ass?" Sokka asked, breaking this stalemate of silence in the least appropriate way. It was a special talent of his, and all the old frowny-scowly guys standing behind Zuko bristled nicely and all the guards behind *them* looked just a little more ready to have roast Water Tribe for lunch.

"A day," Zuko said, like someone had given him the same script for this joke that Sokka was reading from. But Sokka had to say, his delivery sucked. Guy was so hopelessly serious he couldn't even cut it as a straight man.

"I am sure it was quite the story," Iroh said mildly. Peaceably. We're-not-here-to-fight-ily, unless-you-make-us-ily.

"Umm," Prince Eloquent, sorry, *Fire Lord* Eloquent said, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's… it's not that exciting."

Iroh didn’t press for details and the world's worst nephew didn’t offer them. Sokka could tell it was killing the old dragon to stand here and not hug his least homicidal relative (and wasn't *that* just the sliding scale to end all sliding scales). Hug him like he'd hugged all of them in those days before the comet and after, just wrapping them up in his warm *ridiculously muscled* but still squishy-comfortable arms and letting them know that it was all going to be okay. At least, Sokka's pretty sure that was what the old guy was telling them; he wasn’t fluent in Proverb.

Worst Nephew, sorry, *Fire Lord* Worst Nephew definitely looked like he needed someone telling him that. And the associated hugs. Because what he *actually* looked like was that someone held him down and punched dark circles under his good eye, then pulled him back to his feet and fixed his hair. Bastard had perfect hair, seriously, there was just this one strand artistically out of place on his forehead and Sokka did not know why this filled him with *inexplicable rage.* Mostly Zuko, sorry, *Fire Lord* Zuko just had that effect on him. It was kind of a whole package deal, and the hair was just the part of it that made Sokka's own wind-mussed wolftail feel personally inadequate. He *knew* he should have finger-combed before he hopped down from the bison.

Aang was standing a little behind Iroh, the center of a supportive Katara-and-Toph sandwich. The friendly hyperactive chatterbox monk wasn't saying a thing, even though this let's-see-if-talking-to-the-new-Warmonger-Lord-helps shtick was supposed to be his show. He was just… staring. And Sokka knew Aang stopped having nightmares about Ozai after he beat him, but the kid had never stopped having them about Scarface, sorry, *Fire Lord* Scarface.

They would all probably have just kept standing here being awkward forever. But then Zuko glanced up just long enough to actually meet his uncle's eyes, and said it. Said it like he was twisting the knife of Stiff Formalities and using it to gut the one thing his uncle loved most, besides his own stupid self. Sorry, *Fire Lord* Stupid Self.

"...Would you like tea?"

And sure the old guy liked his tea, but like they were really going to drink anything prepared by minions of the Fire Lord—

"We would be honored to accept your generous hospitality, Fire Lord Zuko."

—Okay, but Sokka was not drinking until that guy drank first. Sorry. *Fire Lord* That Guy Drank First.

Chapter 4: Boom

Zuko panicked. Zuko panicked, and now they were waiting for tea around a low table in some quiet side room off the bison-infested courtyard that he wasn't sure he'd seen since before he was banished. There were ink paintings of seaside villages on the walls and the cushions on the floor were blue, and somehow that made the Water Tribe peasant (oh Agni what was his *name)* scowl even harder. He wasn't even sitting at the table with the rest of them; he was leaning against the wall by a window, keeping his weight off of one leg (had he hurt it? Wasn't his sister a healer?), alternating between paranoid glances out at their six-legged mode of retreat and glares at absolutely everything else in the Fire Nation.

A servant brought in their tea on a tray. Zuko took it without thinking, which put both him and the servant into the extremely awkward position of realizing that the *Fire Lord was* going to pour. The servant held onto the tray for one last moment of shock, then let him have it. Retreated from the room, with a demure bow. Zuko took the tray, and set it on the table, and started to serve. His form was as perfect as when he was a waiter in Uncle's shop, when he actually started putting effort into their new life. He hadn't *liked* the job, but that had never stopped him from doing things well. Or at least, with determination. He brought the cups around to each of them, including Water-Tribe-by-the-Window. The teenager glared at the porcelain like he expected it to crash a ship into his village. Zuko just… set it on the floor. And took his own seat at the table. And finally started meeting their eyes, which was exactly as bad as he'd expected.

Uncle still had on his *Quietly Disappointed With Your Life Choices* face. The Avatar—*Avatar Aang* kept looking between them. He was fiddling with his cup, running a finger around the rim. Zuko saw frost lacing over the tea's surface, then it steamed, then the frost again. Toph (he'd only met her once, why did he remember *her* name?) was looking vaguely unfocused and highly amused. She was somehow managing to not look at anything but smirk at *everything.* Katara looked somewhere between murderous and baffled.

"You really did work in a tea shop," she muttered.

Uncle smiled fondly at her, a *You Should Have Believed Me, But I Forgive You As Always* smile. Zuko looked away. Said, maybe more harshly than intended: "Why are you here?"

Which was the point where something further inside the palace exploded.

Immediately the Avatar's group were all on their feet, even Uncle, and pointing swords and water flasks and bending-ready fists his way, except for Uncle. And the Avatar's earthbender —she tilted her head and shifted her stance to face a wall in the explosion's direction. Uncle watched, and mirrored her. Zuko's shoulders stiffened, but he kept his hands in sight and didn't stand and hoped that not defending himself led to world peace and not life-threatening injuries. He *needed* them to trust him. And... he had forgotten to warn them about the explosions. A little.

That left three people actively threatening the still-seated Fire Lord when his guards politely knocked-and-entered.

"Your Majesty—" the first one through the door said, bowing low in that moment before the scene caught up to her. Then there were *more* swords and *more* bending stances and also *shouting for backup* until he raised a forestalling hand.

"Again?" he asked, ignoring all the near-violence and hoping the guards would follow his lead, he was too tired to deal with international brawls at tea time.

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

"Please excuse me," he told the Avatar's group, taking in a deep breath that gave him enough energy to stand. "I'll…" Be back shortly? Probably not. "...I'll have someone send in lunch. Captain Izumi, our guests have free use of this room and the courtyard in my absence."

The guard bowed again, dubiously, and waved her men aside as her Fire Lord stepped past into the hall.

"Zuko," Uncle said, just *Zuko,* and Zuko's heart stuttered a beat. "Was that lightning?"

"Yeah," he said. He couldn't look back, because what if Uncle had that *You're Going Into Danger Without Me* look on his face? ...What if he didn't? "I'll handle it, Uncle. Enjoy your tea."

One of the guards slid the door shut behind him. Zuko unpinned the crown from his hair, and went to see his sister.

Chapter 5: A Hundred Little Pieces Falling Through Her Hands

Chapter Notes

Sokka has broken the POV floodgates. So. Have some Azula!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Azula was no fool, contrary to what her brother and his new lackeys and all the palace servants and guards and flunkies and the nation and the world seemed to think. She was also neither insane nor paranoid. Was it either insanity or paranoia when everyone really did betray you, Mai? Was it either insanity or paranoia when your so-called friend decided your other so-called friend was more worthy of loyalty, Ty Lee? Was it either insanity or paranoia to deal with people *before* they stabbed your heart out and fed it to you so down it went back inside where they could rip it out all over again?

Azula was no fool. But she did keep one on retainer.

"...Azula?" Zuzu's timing was impeccable. It had taken some re-training since his return, but he was really coming along nicely. Just like breaking in a dog-lizard, or bringing lightning to her hands: positive and negative reinforcement.

"You may enter," she allowed. She was lounging back on a cushion by the window. The curtains above her were on fire, the wooden frame behind her shattered, the sky outside properly warned as to her general opinion on sending clouds to cross her path when she was enjoying a good sunbeam sprawl.

He cursed—three years on a navy ship, such a mouth on him now—and scrambled to put it out. She examined her nails while he did, internally counting how long it took him to go from *manually trying to beat it out* to using his firebending. And oh, what was that, his sleep-deprived chi was no match for hers? It took him a full seventeen seconds to realize the curtains were getting neither more nor less on fire no matter what he tried. They were flaring rather nicely with her breathing, actually. Azula had never meditated with candles when property destruction would do.

"Azula," he sighed, and she could actually see him sag in place.

"Is that the proper way to address your Fire Lord?" She would have to repaint her nails soon. It wasn't something she was used to doing on her own. Ty Lee— (Said she was *concerned,* said she *cared,* but while her mouth ran her actions were choosing Mai, Mai who'd chosen Zuko, Zuko who didn't even know because Azula had caught the pair of rat-vipers before they'd ever reached his cell. What did loyalty feel like, when you didn't even know it was given? Probably the same as never being given it at all.)

Zuko sighed, and knelt, and gave a perfunctory bow to the ground before rising back to a courtly seated position. She almost demanded he stand again, because he made sitting look just a slow exhalation away from falling asleep.

"Fire Lord Azula," his eyes flickered to the remains of the window behind her, "did you… request my presence?"

"Zuzu, if I broke a window every time I wanted you, I'd have to leave this wing."

She could actually see the terror grip his spine. She was no fool: she heard the hesitation before the scared scuttling servants call her *Fire Lord.* He always removed the five-pronged crown before he dared approach her, but he'd forget to put the crown of a prince back in. And as the sleepless circle under his good eye had darkened, he'd stopped remembering to shed his robes of office before running to her. Or perhaps he'd just gotten quicker at running. Her lips quirked at the thought.

"Perhaps I *should* go out," she said, tapping a sharp fingernail against her chin. "I imagine court business has gotten quite piled up, without the Fire Lord to approve matters."

"I— That's— There's been nothing that requires your attention, Fire Lord Azula."

"Really." She smiled and watched his face, that delightful medley of all the lies he was too tired to even try. "What news of father?"

"Ozai—"

The curtains behind her flared blue. "Zuzu. Titles."

He grit his teeth. "The *Phoenix King* is still in the Earth Kingdom."

And there was a lie in there too, but she couldn’t wouldn't didn't read it—

(Father had been gone so long.)

(Father had left her here, left her with a golden cast-off crown he didn't want anymore and no one she could trust and a mirror that made her look so *ugly* that she had to break it into a hundred little pieces of her staring up from the floor, each as imperfect as the last, where did they *live* before she broke it?)

"Azula? Are you okay?"

His hand was hovering, was reaching for her, the impertinence of him she should *burn him banish him just go away don't look—*

"That will be all, Zuko." The flames on the curtains behind her were snuffed, were smoke, were cold except for the sun.

He hesitated. His eyes looked just like Ty Lee's when she said *We're worried about you.*

"Zuzu," she said, before he could make any particularly foolish mistakes, "if you hug me, I *will* immolate you. You are dismissed."

He lowered his hand. Stood, a lot less gracefully than he did before he was Fire Lord (before father took him and threw him in jail, and really, if they were going to do that *every* time Zuko did something stupidly treasonous in the name of their nation's honor, why had father even let him come home?)

(Because Azula had asked.)

He was still watching her, looking, *peering* but it was only Zuko. "Are the servants treating you right? Do we need to banish anyone else?"

She'd seen the ones he'd banished from her windows, smiling and walking through the palace grounds, still impertinently serving in other wings. She would go outside and punish them herself (but then they would see her, a hundred little pieces on the floor that cut her hands as she tried to pick them up, they would never fit together without seams, never be perfect again, if she went out *they would see)* but she really couldn't be bothered with peasants. It was far more entertaining to let *Fire Lord Zuko* handle them for her, her own royal secretary working himself down to ashes. "Zuzu, I hardly need your help managing my own staff."

He shifted his weight. "...You know you can call for me, right? Without lighting things on fire. I'd come."

He would, too. The Dum-Dum.

"What part of 'dismissed' do you not understand?"

She was no fool. She was neither insane nor paranoid. And she was not *weak,* she did not need her big brother who might as well be her little brother for all the sense he had, did not need him acting like he could *protect* her.

From what? She was the Fire Lord. She was just letting him handle the administrative details. She could have that crown of his back any time she wanted, and he knew it. One little Agni Kai was all it took for royalty to supplant royalty. They had equal claim to the throne: he the older heir and a known screw up, she the younger and the favored in the eyes of Agni and

father and the Sages crowned her *first.* Or she could just kill him on one of these little visits. There was no one in the entire Fire Nation who could stop her.

He was at the door now, his back to her, and for one moment he looked like he might change his mind and *stay.* Fire Lord Azula rolled her eyes, and trailed her arms in a purposeful circle.

"Oh, and Zuzu? Catch."

It was just enough warning for him to turn and root his stance. He did that little redirection trick of Uncle's, and for just one moment Azula was staring at her own lightning crackling white-blue and mirror-shard jagged, wreathing him as he moved his hands in, down, up, out and all he needed to do was point it straight back at her unwavering smile like any *sane* person would—

The lightning cracked against the ceiling. A smoldering splinter of the rafters fell and hit his shoulder. He rubbed the spot, biting back curses that were creative even by his standards. *"Goodbye,* Azula."

She could hear him stomping all the way out of her wing. Always so dramatic. The ceiling was a bit on fire; she let out a breath, and it turned cold, but the sunlight through the shattered window was warm against her back.

He never tried to kill her, even when she handed him the weapons herself. Didn't poison her food or water, didn't send in enough cannon-fodder guards to simply overwhelm her. Didn't *leave* her, except when father banished him or locked him away.

He was a hopeless fool. She would have to keep him close for his own protection, even after she plucked back her throne. Agni knew what he'd do without her; probably run off and join the Avatar, or something equally ridiculous.

As long as Zuko knew where the real power was, he could keep his little crown. It pleased her, for now.

Chapter End Notes

Azula seems to me, at her core, a girl who is just as unshakably loyal as her brother, but who expects—demands—that loyalty to be returned. And she cracks a little inside every time someone falls short of her ridiculously high standards (like "be more loyal to me than your baby brother who's been kidnapped by rebels"). And mommy dearest started her off with a rather big crack, and Zuzu's banishment left her alone with an abusive father for three years starting when she was ten or eleven, and friendly Uncle Iroh thinks a fourteen-year-old girl is crazy and needs to go down. Girl has no support system and solid proof her face will get burned off if she screws up. She was going to have a breakdown sooner or later; Towards-the-Sun!Azula now needs to figure out how to pick herself up in the wake of learning she's-not-has-never-been-can't-ever-be perfect.

Also: she totally could have done worse to show!Zuko after Ba Sing Se than keep her word, bring him home with full honors, restore his position in the line of succession, and take him on a soul-baring beach vacation. Sure there were a few ominous threats tossed in here and there, but that's just the Azula flavoring! How else will the Dum-Dum know she doesn't-care? It's like Toph's arm punches, only more nightmare inducing, and with the potential to land you in literal fire.

My goal is to write an Azula "redemption" arc that doesn't dull how utterly terrifying she is for all those around her. Redemption in quotations because the girl is not evil, she just needs hugs and a psychologist.

Chapter 6: Dignity

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by Poor Impulse Control®! Poor Impulse Control®: "I should be building a chapter buffer, but I'd rather be a comment whore instead!"

Seriously, great comments. Love you all so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zuko couldn't stomp all the way back to the Avatar's group. It wasn't something a Fire Lord would *do,* it wasn't dignified and it would take too much energy, anyway. The guards who always trailed him were doing that side-eyeing they did, like they were going to suggest that he take a break. They were getting really bold about that, they'd *never* be so impertinent with Ozai or Azula. But he wasn't Ozai or Azula. And when yesterday's meeting with General Daichi dissolved into a *No you can't, Yes I can* on the subject of marching troops straight through beaten-but-not-secured Goaling, and what part of *don't provoke the Earth Kingdom further* did the general not understand, his Guard Captain had cleared her throat and escorted the general from the room without his orders. He had let her presumption slide in favor of… just resting his head in his hands. For awhile.

The blanket over his shoulders when he'd woken back up had been crossing a line, though. Especially when none of them would admit to putting it there.

Zuko was going somewhere with these thoughts. He'd just… lean against this wall until he remembered where.

The courtyard was just around the corner, and the Water Tribe peasant was loud.

"This is some kind of cruel Fire Nation torture."

"Just eat, Snoozles," Toph said.

His name was Snoozles? Zuko blinked. He *did* remember it starting with an 'S'...

"Toph, spit that out! You *know* it's poison. Delectably aromatic meaty poison. It's probably too spicy, anyway. To cover the poison."

"Man, poison is *delicious."*

"Toph!"

"Should I tell them I'm a vegetarian?" Avatar Aang asked.

"What, so they can poison you too?"

"I mean, I wouldn't want to be left out…"

"Aang!"

Zuko pushed off from the wall and rounded the corner. "It's not poisoned. And I'll… send for something vegetarian." He looked at one of his guards. The man nodded, and broke off to find a servant. Captain Izumi was very clearly *not pleased* with having one less of her people around for backup as they approached those who were threatening her Fire Lord earlier in the hour.

"That is *completely unnecessary,"* Snoozles said, splitting a glare between Zuko and the Avatar. "We don't need— What happened to *you?"*

Zuko stopped rubbing his shoulder, and stood up a little straighter.

"Specifically, your hair. Not that I've been paying particular attention to your hair, but now you've got like *twenty* strands out of place and that's not artistic *at all."*

Zuko very self-consciously avoided touching his head. If it was really that bad, his guards would have said something. Probably. Scowling was the appropriate reaction, and Zuko employed it. The peasant scowled right back.

Their group was lounging by the bison, who apparently doubled as a sofa. The servants had brought them a simple lunch of picken stirfry over rice. Toph had demolished her bowl and reached for Snoozles', who made a sad noise of almost-protest as he watched it leave him. Uncle was politely picking at his. Katara and Aang looked mildly offended by their dishes, likely for very different reasons.

The bison was sniffing in his direction. Zuko took a small step away from the ten-ton airbending master who'd only seen him in times of high stress.

Uncle set down his chopsticks. "Are you all right, Fire Lord Zuko?"

Zuko stopped rubbing his shoulder. Again. "It's nothing."

The Dragon of the West had been cultivating his *Dubious Look* while traveling with these children. Either that, or Zuko's immunity to it had worn off.

"I just hit my shoulder. With the ceiling."

"What," Snoozles said.

"That's… not important," Zuko flushed. "Shall we continue?"

The bison was *looking* at him. It seemed like it wanted to come after him, but it was covered in children.

Zuko retreated inside and sat. He was relieved when they followed. The bison's head was too big to fit in the window; it was just a giant slowly blinking eye.

"Would you like for Miss Katara to heal you?" Uncle asked mildly, and Zuko dropped his hand away from his shoulder.

The waterbender's glare was anything but mild, and promised that his shoulder wouldn't hurt ever again by the time she was done *healing* him.

"...Thank you for your generous offer," Zuko thoroughly declined.

"Zuko," Uncle said. He'd taken the seat nearest him this time, and now he reached for one of the hands Zuko had been hiding up the long sleeves of his robes. Zuko started to pull away but the bison distracted him with a *whuff* of grass-smelling breath that filled the room and put at least five more strands out of place on his head, and now Uncle had his sleeve pushed back and could see the way his hand shook, could see the burns on his fingertips. Zuko couldn't redirect Azula's lightning fully anymore. It had been getting worse, every time, and he wasn't sure if she *knew* and he was afraid to tell her, because there were two very different ways she could react to learning how close she was coming to really hurting him.

"Zuko," Uncle said, like he still *cared.*

Zuko snatched his hand back. "It's not the first time I've redirected lightning, Uncle."

Which was news to the retired general. Most unwelcome news, by the dark look on his face. "Azula?"

Zuko turned his head to the side. And then suddenly Uncle was there and Uncle was *hugging him,* and Zuko's shoulder hurt from how stiff he was holding it, and the Avatar and his friends were *right there* watching—

Uncle loosened his grip. Just a little. He turned a smile towards his companions. "May I have a moment alone with my nephew?"

Nephew. Zuko tried really hard, he did, but he was sinking into Uncle's arms and Uncle's shirt before he was even sure they were gone. And the guards were right in the doorway, and this was *not* how a Fire Lord should act, but he was just—

"I'm so sorry, Uncle, I'm sorry, I betrayed you and I was going to make it right but I screwed that up, too—"

Some of the words that came blubbering out made sense but most of them didn't and the ones that did weren't even in order, this was *humiliating.* Uncle just held him tighter even though Zuko was getting his shirt all wet and gross, even though he was a mess of a human being, even though Uncle could hate him forever and it still wouldn't be long enough.

One of his guards slid the door softly shut. Uncle kept holding him, and didn't hate him.

Chapter End Notes

I think we all needed this chapter. Writing Uncle cold-shouldering Zuko was physically painful, in the same way writing Azula in a room with anything living fills me with deep anxiety.

Chapter 7: Gross Sobby Tears (Do Not Fool Katara)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Katara had been keeping track of water sources since before they touched down. There was a small pond in a hidden courtyard to the east, just at the edge of her range to feel but not touch; closer, there were water cisterns and basins and irrigation channels for the gardens, and the same pipes that were aboard the Fire Navy ship where she'd nursed Aang back to health, metal-wrapped water just waiting to be burst with a bit of help from Toph. There was the water skin at her hip. There were the dozen other skins hidden under their supplies on Appa, the ones Aang didn't want her to bring but got outvoted on.

Katara had been keeping track of water sources, which made it very hard to ignore new ones. But she was trying her hardest and scowliest, because—

"Is anyone else fundamentally disturbed that Zuko, sorry, *Fire Lord* Zuko is in there sobbing gross sobby tears?" her brother eloquently put it.

"Not just Zuko," Toph grinned, digging her feet into the stone tiles of the courtyard. One of the guards frowned at the property damage.

"Thank you, Toph, for that skillfully painted mental image of Iroh and Fire Lord Angry Pants embracing their inner waterbenders."

"Anytime, Snoozles."

A servant stepped into the courtyard, and bowed. The Fire Nation bowed a *lot.* "A vegetarian lunch for the Avatar?" He made it sound like a question. Frankly, Katara was questioning why they were here, too. Besides Iroh, Aang, and Toph voting her and Sokka's objections down. At least they'd agreed to wait until Sokka's leg was out of the cast.

"That's me!" Aang had been sitting back against Appa; now he hopped to his feet with a puff of air. "I'm the Avatar." This did not seem to reassure the servant. There was a lot more

bowing, and also holding a steaming bowl of presumably vegetarian stirfry out like a spirit offering.

Good. They *should* be scared. Aang already defeated their real leader, and probably their strongest firebender, too. Ozai was rotting under General Fong's gentle care, powerless in every definition of the word. It took the Avatar State to beat him, but Zuko? Katara could handle Zuko herself.

"Thanks!" Aang took the bowl and bowed back with a smile, Fire Nation style. The servant blinked. And returned the smile, hesitantly.

"Aang," Sokka said. "Aang, you are *not* eating that. That was specially prepared for the Avatar, that is what we call *specially made poison* Aang— *Aang!"*

"Hey, give that back!"

"This is for world peace, Aang!" Sokka held the bowl out of reach, presumably also for world peace.

The servant's smile faltered. He gave himself a little shake, then turned to the silver-haired guard who'd been following Zuko around like an avenging hawk-lion. "The Fire Lord did not attend lunch with his councilors. The chef respectfully sends this to him, if His Majesty is not too busy."

Another bowl was offered, this time to the guard. She took it with a quick glance to the closed doors behind her, a slight slumping of shoulders, and a polite nod. "The Fire Lord appreciates your concern."

"...I'll try again in an hour," the servant said.

They bowed to each other. So. Much. Bowing. Then the servant left, after a bow towards the closed door and a bow towards their group and another bow and a few steps backwards as he

re-entered the palace. (There was just a brief pause in that last one as he spotted the cracked pavement around Toph's toes. Then a deeper bow, which hid his frown.)

"Hey," Sokka said. "So that one was specially made for your glorious Fire Lord right? And he's probably not going to eat it before it gets all cold and gross and that servant guy needs to bring a new one anyway, right? Which he's already planning to do, and I mean, we wouldn't want to interrupt uncle-nephew cry time for something as trivial as delicious non-poisonous stirfry, right?"

The silver-haired woman looked very close to dumping the bowl on him. Instead she held it out with one hand and a bow.

Bows could be *sarcastic,* Katara learned. Sokka seemed to miss this lesson as he grabbed the food like a starving coyote-vulture and started shoveling it down. He still had Aang's lunch tucked protectively under one arm.

"Sokka," Aang whined.

"Fo' 'orld 'eace," Sokka managed to say through the disgusting half-chewed spitty mess in his mouth, *eww.* "Oww oww *spicy* oww—" His eyes watered. This did not stop him from taking another bite.

"Hey, guard lady." Toph said. "Is Aang's meal poisoned?"

The guard gave the blind girl a *look.* Then visibly realized that she was giving a *blind girl* a look. Then answered, in the most grudging monotone Katara had ever heard: "Not to my knowledge."

" 'Hat ish *not* a 'no'," Sokka pointed out. Swallowed. "And anyway, we know how good the Fire Nation is at lying. Zuko fooled Katara under Ba Sing Se, and his sister is a purple platypus-bear. This guard is probably, what, a yellow catagator?"

The guard had gone back to standing at perfect attention, impassively staring just above their heads. Katara really couldn’t blame her. Which was… not a sentence she generally applied to Fire Nation citizens, outside of Iroh and certain oppressed villagers.

Toph tilted her head, wiggled her toes, and busted up another few inches of royal property. A grin spread over her face. "D'awww, platypus nephew just fell asleep on Uncle's shoulder. And"—another wiggle—"I think Uncle's arm is going numb but he doesn't want to move it. Like that time after the comet when Sokka curled up and complained about his broken leg and how heroes should get the girl but all he got was a missing moon girlfriend."

"Girlfriends," Sokka corrected. "Those are two different people and/or celestial bodies. And that was a private discussion! A private, manly discussion! That you should not have been—*hey!"*

Aang airburst himself to Appa's head, already eating his re-stolen lunch. But *he* took the time to chew and swallow before speaking. "To be fair, tent walls are *really thin.* I think we all heard that one. And… sorry about Suki. Hey, maybe Zuko knows where she is! Or he can ask Azula."

The thought of being in Azula's line of sight brought the usual shudder-pause over their group.

"Gotta admit," Toph said finally, "I am not seeing the evil angry assistant-Avatar-slaying prince. Fire Lord Cuddles is not living up to the hype."

"Please, Toph," Sokka said. "Please. Don't call him that. I will owe you an unspecified favor if you do not call him that."

"Done deal, Snoozles. You are going to regret that *so hard."* Toph wiggled her toes in the direction of the room, and *d'awwed* again. Obnoxiously. Which was an adjective that was redundant when speaking of Toph.

Katara uncapped her waterskin, and streamed out a small orb. The guards all watched her warily, the silver-haired one most of all, but she just… needed to freeze something into tiny

jagged spikes right now, and it was probably best if that thing wasn't alive.

"Toph," she said. She kept her voice low, so only their group could hear. "I know you only met him once, and he was *almost* being helpful. But you know we haven't been lying about the rest. He's dangerous, and he can lie just as well as his sister. Maybe even better; at least *she* comes off as a sociopath. I had every reason to hate him in those catacombs, and I *did,* but he… he managed to convince me he was this good, confused person who just needed a *chance.* He knows exactly how to play on your emotions, how to talk and act like someone who wants to be on your side if you would only let him. And then as soon as your guard is lowered, as soon as he's in position to get what he wants, he strikes."

And you spent the next few minutes praying that your best friend's heartbeat was just too weak to hear over your own, not that it was *gone.* The next few hours healing while on bison-back, your hands numb from wind and water but this wasn't about you and you couldn't stop. The next few weeks caring for a coma patient, and Sokka said he'd handle the… the *clean ups* but it was two in the morning and Sokka was asleep and you couldn't leave Aang *laying* in that.

Toph dug her toes in deeper, and frowned.

Sokka finished his bowl. Set it down, and leaned back against Appa. He spoke quietly, too. "This whole time, we thought Azula was the smart one. But think about it: she went from the favored princess to… what? We heard she got crowned, and she's almost definitely the one who was tossing around lightning just then, which means he's got her what, locked up in some room in the palace while he rules? And Zuko, he went from *banished prince, woe is me, have you seen my honor* to Fire Lord. In the space of a summer. When we *know* Ozai doesn't like him. It hurts my brain to say this, because *Zuko,* but it sounds like we're dealing with a master manipulator here. We *know* it runs in the family. If you just consider results and ignore the *Zuko-ness,* it looks like we got played. Hard. ...And Aang, if you drop dead after lunch, I'm going to go kick Hei Bai's statue until it sends me back to the Spirit World so I can say I told you so. And then I'm going to find your next incarnation, and name it Baby I-Told-You-So. And then—"

"I get it, Sokka," Aang snapped, setting down his bowl. "I don't think I'm that hungry, anyway." He got so quiet, she almost couldn't hear what he said next. "Guys. If we can't trust him, how can we trust him?"

Which was a silly question on the surface, but… not really.

Zuko was the leader of the Fire Nation. If they couldn’t trust him, they couldn’t trust the *Fire Nation,* even if he miraculously decided to end the war and—and take Aang as his best friend, and embrace vegetarianism, and go around *not* kicking puppy-kittens.

Katara saw a simple solution to the trust problem. Several if she started feeling creative, but two stood out. General Fong had a few empty cells next to Ozai's. And the ocean had a few trenches where a firebender would never be found.

She was *not* losing Aang. Not again.

Toph flopped back on the ground, her feet still rooted. As cavalier as she acted, Katara knew she was nervous about Iroh. They weren't in that room to protect him if something went wrong, and there was no way he'd guard against his precious *nephew.*

"All I'm saying," the earthbender started, "is if I didn't have your guys' stories, I'd think Zuko was the most easily read person I've ever met. And what I'm reading is a lot of sleep deprivation and a little probably-lightning-induced should-really-see-a-healer arrhythmia, but not a whole lot of cackle-while-the-world-burns. And Uncle's happier than I've ever felt him. So maybe let's give Fire Lord Needs-a-Nap a chance, okay?"

"Okay," Sokka said, with the least agreement possible. "...Could you just *not* give him a name, Toph?"

"Not enough unspecified favors in the world, Snoozles."

"Yeah," Aang said. "A chance. I mean, he's probably had a really stressful summer—"

"Aang," Sokka said, "do not even *start* on how *Fire Lord Zuko* had a more stressful summer than us—"

"You're right, Toph," Katara said sweetly, freezing and refreezing the water between her hands. "Everyone deserves a chance."

She'd already given Zuko his.

Chapter End Notes

The temptation to poison Sokka when he ate that "specifically for the Fire Lord" lunch was nearly overwhelming, but I couldn't think of anyone who'd both be willing and in position to poison Zuko at this point in the story. Also it would have really derailed these intro chapters. Have I mentioned this is the prologue, guys? 'Cause we are definitely still in the prologue, you will know when we hit Book One. So. Sokka gets a pass on ironic meal-related stomach pains.

This time.

Chapter 8: Agreement

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zuko lived in this room now. The Avatar and his group were still in the courtyard outside, and they knew he'd been crying and probably figured out that he'd *taken a nap,* and Uncle hadn't even bothered to wake him up and now the sun was close to setting and Zuko was *never leaving this room again.* Not while they were outside. This, he realized, was probably how Azula felt. Minus the tear tracks, he couldn't picture Azula crying.

...Even her *breakdowns* were better than his.

"Zuko," Uncle said. "If you do not want to continue this meeting today, I am sure that Avatar Aang—"

Which prompted a reflexive, "I'm *fine,* Uncle," which for some reason made Uncle smile, and somehow that made Zuko think maybe he really would be fine.

But he was still never leaving this room. Which was going to make it difficult to wash his face, or get un-rumpled robes, or fix his hair and *why was he even paranoid about that.* Stupid Snoozles.

Also, he was really hungry. Which was weird, since he definitely remembered to eat lunch.

...Yesterday.

Crap.

Uncle slid the door just slightly open and conveyed a few quiet requests to Captain Izumi. Which was how a small wash basin and a new over robe (and a non-snotty shirt for Uncle) were shortly delivered to the room. Carried past the Avatar's group.

Zuko dropped his head on the table. He'd gotten enough sleep to feel *feelings* again. They were awful.

He and Uncle looked presentable by the time another servant arrived with a tray of dinner for them. He ate it, even though his stomach was already twisting. And then they were finished, and another servant was hanging lanterns in the room as the sun set outside, and there was no excuse to put this off any longer.

So he sat at the table's head again, for the third time today, and slipped on a glower that felt just safe enough, and allowed Uncle to welcome the Avatar's group back in.

They all took a seat this time, even Snoozles. Since the bison's furry side was blocking the last of the sunset from the window, Zuko supposed they didn't have to be paranoid about its location. A servant entered with fresh tea, and very pointedly kept it out of the Fire Lord's reach until he'd poured for everyone. They waited for the man to leave. Then they began. (Again.)

"Please forgive the interruptions, Avatar Aang," Zuko bowed slightly, ruler to foreign dignitary.

"Ah, no problem?" the Avatar replied, scratching the back of his head.

"Are we all just going to pretend the gross sobby tears didn't happen?" Snoozles asked. And looked around. "Okay, I guess we are. Carry on— *oww!* Toph, no arm punching in front of the enemy!"

Zuko decided that a glower was far too conservative. This meeting deserved a *scowl.* "Remind me again why you're all here?"

They all looked at the Av—at Avatar Aang. The small monk, why did he have to be so *young,* jumped a little where he sat. "We… we want to end the war."

Which was completely and utterly baffling to Zuko, because the war was already *over,* and it probably showed on his face. The monk kept talking, a babble of words about the four nations and restoring balance and harmony to the elements, and Zuko sat waiting for a good place to work in a reply but eventually he realized he was just going to have to interrupt. He held up a stalling hand (Avatar Aang flinched, Katara set a thumb on the cap of her waterskin, Snoozle's hand twitched towards his sword. Uncle sipped tea. Toph picked something out from between her toes, and flicked it over her shoulder.)

"I agree." Zuko's shoulders tightened under the force of their combined stares. He reached habitually for one of the maps that had always been on hand in the past few weeks, but there weren't any in this room. Crossed his hands in his lap, and prayed that the heat he was feeling in his face was *not* a blush, or that they didn't notice, or that the earthbender would obligingly sink him into the ground now. "I've already ordered the troop withdrawals. It will take more time to fully organize things, but the Fire Nation will not be taking further aggressive actions. We've sent messages, have they... not gotten through?"

"The generals have been throwing them out," Snoozles, was that seriously his name? Now that Zuko was a little more awake he didn't think so, it was Sokka or Soaka or something, but those were *also* stupid and Snoozles was the only thing anyone had actually called him by—Crap. Crap crap, he was still talking, refocus. "—So the *next* hawk, I made sure to get there first myself, and I was all like *you know I'm a council advisor, just give it to me, I'll trot it right on over for you,* which is how we finally got to read one. Gotta say, it sounded a little too good to be true. *'This is completely BS propaganda to delay you from pressing your advantage and give us time to rebuild our flying death fleet'* levels of too-good-to-be-true. I wanted to just throw it out too, but certain air nomads who will remain unnamed thought it might be for real and you deserved to be heard out. So here we are. Hearing you out."

"...Thanks?" Zuko said. This was not the right answer, based on the silence that engulfed the table.

Toph broke it with a roll of her too-pale eyes—wait, was she *blind?* "So, Fire Lord Hot Pants."

"What did you—?"

"Focus. Are you serious about ending the war?"

"Yes."

"No more fighting?"

"No. Well, yes, but there have been attacks on the withdrawing troops. We're not *trying* to start fights but I'm not going to let—"

"Got it. Say something false."

"...What?"

"A lie, Sparky. You know what those are?"

"I… yes? Why— *Sparky?"* Zuko had always known he was bad at reading people, but when he looked around the table expecting expressions of *let's make fun of the teenage ruler* and instead found ones of *intense concentration* (and an encouraging nod from Uncle), he realized he should just give up on trying entirely, people didn't make *sense.* He pinched the bridge of his nose, and squeezed his eyes shut. They were still waiting when he opened them. "...I'm the Avatar?"

"Keep going," Toph said.

"And, uh, I fly around. On my bison. And do Avatar things." Was he supposed to just talk until she said to stop? "...Balance and harmony, yay?"

The earthbender went from *serious face* to *a small avalanche made of laughter.*

"Well that was horrifying," Snoozles said.

"I don't know," the actual Avatar said, with a certain amount of friendly pity, "I thought it was pretty good. I *do* fly around and do Avatar things."

"He's not lying about ending the war," the earthbender said, when she could talk again. "And I *can* tell."

...She could? Zuko stared at her.

There was a porcelain clatter in front of him. When he looked down, his tea was sloshing in its cup and the Water Tribe peasant was far-too-casually sipping from his own. And Uncle was sighing his *Nephew We Talked About This* sigh (which Zuko cringed slightly at, even though it wasn't directed at him), and the waterbender was dragging her hand down her face, and the Avatar just looked embarrassed.

"Did you just switch our cups?" Zuko asked, slowly. "Why wou—? Do you *seriously* think I'd poison you?"

"I don't seriously think you wouldn't," Snoozles replied, just as slowly. "Also I was thirsty. Your lunch was *really* spicy, and Katara won't let me drink from her combat waterskins, which is apparently now *every* waterskin."

Which was about the time Zuko lost his temper. He'd had just enough sleep for yelling to seem worth it again. "If I was going to poison anyone here, it would be the Avatar, not his non-bending hanger-on!"

"Also true," Toph helpfully verified.

"Perhaps we should all calm down, and enjoy our tea before it cools," Uncle suggested.

"I do not have time for this." Zuko's head was in his hands and he didn't remember putting it there. But while his eyes were shut, maybe he could just take another quick nap, the last one had felt *really good*— No. No, sitting up straight again. Even better: standing. "Thank you for visiting. It's been a pleasure."

"Lie," the earthbender sang.

Do not shout at the blind girl, do *not.* "I'm sure you can find your way back to the Earth Kingdom from here."

The earthbender wiggled her hand. "Kind of half-and-half. You really think we can't find our way back?"

"I've seen this group try to navigate," Zuko growled. "You got *better* when you added a blind girl."

Snoozles snarled. The blind girl in question threw back her head and laughed again. And Uncle's lips… twitched. Almost smiled, before he looked away. Which was the only reason Zuko sat back down.

There was a lot of angry, awkward tea-sipping.

"So… the war is really over? The Fire Nation is going to stop attacking?" Avatar Aang asked, like Zuko hadn't already said exactly that. "That's… That's *great.* I was—well, I didn't know what to expect when we heard *you* were Fire Lord, but if you want to stop the war and we want to stop the war then we can just work together and make sure everyone else stops, too! I'll talk to the Earth King—well, once we find him, but it can't be that hard to find a man with a bear—"

What.

"—but until then I can talk to the generals and make sure they don't attack your troops as they retreat—"

It wasn’t a retreat, it was a withdrawal. And back up, the Earth King was missing? With a bear? What kind of bear? Wait, was this the stupid bear that got a birthday party? The bear that had probably been eating better than him and Uncle in Ba Sing Se? *That* bear?

"—And if you need help with the colonies, maybe we can ask the Water Tribes to lend extra ships—"

Zuko was still a little hung up on the bear, but he shook himself out of it. "Stop. Just… stop. What were you saying about the colonies?"

Avatar Aang stared down at his hands as his thumbs chased each other in twiddling circles. "I know I kind of… *broke* a few of your ships. At the North Pole."

Sent over a thousand people into graves of steel and salt, yes.

"So you might not have enough for the evacuation. And I'm sure everyone would be happier if this got done as quickly as possible. Katara and Sokka know the man who leads the Southern Water Tribe's fleet, he's a friend of their dad. I'm sure he'd help."

"Help evacuate the colonies," Zuko repeated, and the tea between his hands was steaming again like it was fresh from the pot, or just about to boil.

"Yeah." Avatar Aang smiled. Everyone else at the table was distinctly *not* smiling, maybe not even breathing, as they looked from the Avatar to Zuko and back again.

"We won't need help with that," Zuko said, "because we won't be doing it."

"Truth," the earthbender said.

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: the bulk of this chapter was written as the original chapter four. Then I realized I really needed to set up Azula's situation, and we might as well get in one uncomplicated uncle-nephew hug before the plot hit.

Chapter 9: Disagreement

"The colonies are Fire Nation territory," Zuko said, a little slowly, because he wasn't sure why they didn't *understand* this.

"You mean Earth Kingdom territory," Toph said, and she wasn't laughing anymore.

And Zuko was… baffled again. Worse than before, when the Avatar was going on and on about ending a war that Zuko had already ended two months ago. This was just… he didn't know what this was. It was like they were talking about flowers but one of them was colorblind.

"Who do you think won the war?" he asked, with a pit in his stomach where their answer would go.

"Who do *you* think?" Snoozles said. "Last I checked, we've got your leader locked up, not the other way around."

"Ozai's alive?" That pit was dark and gaping, and maybe he shouldn't have eaten dinner after all.

The peasant *preened.* "Alive and powerless. Completely at our mercy. So you'd better—"

"What kind of precautions are you taking?" Zuko wasn't breathing right, he'd never breathed this wrong before, it *hurt.* "Does the Earth Kingdom have freezer cells?" He was on the brink of offering them one when he realized what a terrible idea that was, the other nations did *not* need that technology. "You can make due with steel cuffs, as long as they're thick enough that they'd burn his wrists before he could melt his way through—" And he didn't think about how he learned that, he *didn't,* his wrists didn't even scar. (Nothing could really hurt him if it didn't leave a scar.)

"Woah. Hold up. Don't you *like* your dad? Like, dedicated years of your life to pleasing him at great and frankly *suicidal* personal risk, with not even an *'adequate job, son'* and an indifferent pat on the back to keep you going?"

Zuko was glad his breathing was so wrong, it just sounded like he was choking instead of laughing. "I'm done doing that."

"Now that you have your throne," the waterbender said. "Is that all family counts for, in the Fire Nation?"

The way she said that made him stiffen. Worse, it made Uncle stare into his tea without drinking it. Zuko took in a deliberate breath, and another, and another, until a curl of flame between his teeth let him know that even though his chest still ached his breathing was right again.

Then he took another few breaths, to make sure he didn’t light anything on fire.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding, here." This sounded very diplomatic. He hoped. "I'm ending the war because it's the right thing to do—"

The waterbender snorted. This was Zuko's *diplomatic* scowl.

"—But we didn't *lose.* You beat one man. Won one battle against an untested new fleet. You didn't beat the *Fire Nation.* We can talk about terms for prisoner of war exchanges, and withdrawal of troops from contested areas, and even what exactly our final borders will be, but we're *not* going to talk about who won. Because you didn't."

"But…" the Avatar looked a little sick. And like he didn’t know how to finish that sentence. The earthbender was frowning in the general direction of his chest. The waterbender's hands were hidden out of sight under the table, along with her waterskin.

Uncle wasn't saying anything.

Snoozles held up a hand. It wasn’t for Zuko's benefit, so it must be for his group's. "Prisoners of war. What terms are we talking?"

"Um, well…" This was something Zuko should really discuss with his councilors, but it wasn’t like anyone was writing his words into a formal peace accord. "We want ours back. Obviously. And I… don't especially want to keep yours." He was *terrible* at using leverage, this was like when he tied Katara to a tree and just yelled at her instead of—of other things. Things he *couldn't* have done, not even to catch the Avatar, because having no honor was not the same as being honorless. "They'll probably have to swear an oath not to raise arms against the Fire Nation again, and we'll have to keep the leaders until—"

"Until what?" there was something almost hopeful in Snoozles' face that was gone now, closed off.

"Until we're sure they're not going to go right back to rallying people against us," Zuko snapped. "I'm sorry, was a term-free release of *everyone else* not good enough for you? Am I supposed to be an idiot, on top of generous? I know the Avatar hit me through a few walls, but I'm not *brain damaged.* Captured leaders will remain in the Fire Nation."

Zuko heard a cork pop. This didn’t immediately have meaning to him, except that his body knew that sound from half a year of fighting them and he was already dodging to the side before—

The waterbender was completely rigid. Uncle's hand was on her shoulder, holding her in place.

So Zuko just threw himself on the floor for nothing, is what just happened. Her brother was smirking at him. She… wasn't. He picked himself back up, straightened his robes, and ran fingers through his non-artistic hair.

"I think," Uncle said, "we are all a little tired. Perhaps we can continue these discussions in the morning, Fire Lord Zuko? If we may be so bold as to presume upon your hospitality for another day."

"Yeah," Zuko said. "...Yeah. I'll have rooms arranged."

"Bison-adjacent rooms," the peasant was quick to clarify.

"Fine," Zuko snapped, with only a hint of snarl. "Did you bring enough supplies to avoid *poisoning,* or should I ask the servants to arrange for your meals, as well?"

"We'll take the meals, Sparky," Toph said, before anyone else in her party could decline.

"Good." Zuko stood, keeping his feet rooted and his eyes mostly on the waterbender, whose eyes hadn't left *him* since she stepped off that bison this morning. "I—why would you even *think* you'd won? Can somebody *please* explain that?"

He shouldn't sound this close to begging. But. How did their minds even *work.*

"Well we beat Ozai," the Avatar said, "and then the troops started... withdrawing…"

Because Zuko ordered them to, the Avatar seemed to be belatedly realizing. Which was related to Ozai's defeat, but not as much as they wanted it to be.

"Goodnight, Zuko," Uncle said, and Zuko realized he was staying with *them.* Zuko… didn't know why he'd ever thought otherwise. "May I have your blessings to visit the Fire Temple in the morning? It has been quite some time since I have been home. Well, home and unfettered from other obligations." He chuckled like his imprisonment was a joke.

Zuko swallowed thickly, and refrained from rubbing his own wrists. "Of course, Uncle. You're… you're welcome here. Always. I'll make sure the guards know you have full liberties of the palace." He turned a scowl on the rest of the group. "Please make sure your companions remain in their assigned quarters."

He opened and closed the door for himself, which always left his guards and any nearby servants looking mildly affronted.

"Huh," the Water Tribe peasant said, too loud even through the closed door. "That will be useful. So I'm nominating Iroh as our palace spy, any objections?"

Zuko sighed, and went to his room. The minutes for every meeting he'd missed today and all the ones he would never have had time to attend anyway were stacked neatly on his desk. General Daichi *still* wanted to march through Gaoling.

At least Zuko got in that nap earlier. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter 10: In Which Iroh Reacquaints Himself With the Palace and its Staff

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Iroh was up with the sunrise. There was nothing quite like the sun in Caldera—the way it climbed up the slopes of their mountain unseen, whispering power at the edge of his chi. Then the swift moment it crested the volcano's rim and spilled out over the whole of the city—

This was the sun of his childhood, the sun he had missed during those six hundred days in the flat expanses around Ba Sing Se. Curious that years later, he would learn that being *inside* those walls gave the sun a rather similar effect. Similar, but not the same, in a city divided by walls. Too many shadows, both literal and figurative, in very different proportions than Caldera's.

Iroh folded his blanket neatly, and stepped over his student. Avatar Aang *should* have risen with the dawn, but while he could firebend with great proficiency, Iroh would not yet call him a fire *bender*. The sprawled limbs of Sokka proved a slightly more difficult ground to pick his way across, but Iroh made it to the door without waking either of them.

Judging by the very lady-like snores coming from the adjoining room, Miss Bei Fong and Katara were still getting their beauty rest, as well.

Several guards were positioned in the courtyard, as they had been all night. The one directly outside his door was already frowning at him. No, that would be an insult to her professionalism: better to say she was observing him with a distinct lack of smile.

"Captain Izumi," he inclined his head.

"Prince Iroh." Her bow was perfect, and perfectly perfunctory: exactly the right angle, held for exactly the right amount of time. Iroh would ask what he had done to offend the senior guard, but he suspected the list was rather too long to go over in one sitting.

Iroh set his steps towards the Fire Temple. The gray-haired captain fell into step behind him.

He took the long way, of course.

"Miss Huian! I thought it was the sun that woke me, but truly it was your radiant beauty."

The servant bowed, laughing behind a sleeve. "Good morning, Prince Iroh. We were warned you were back in the palace."

"Warned?" he feigned a gasp. "Warnings are for rabbit-deer, running from the hunter. The tame mink-cat has nothing to fear. Ah, but perhaps you are *not* tame..."

"Perhaps the Honored Prince wishes to confer with my Lord Husband on this topic?"

"Ah, perhaps not." Iroh coughed into his hand. "Is my nephew awake?"

The woman looked flustered, in a way his flirting had not achieved. She darted a glance over her shoulder, not towards the Fire Lord's rooms, but the rooms of the crown prince. "Not yet, Prince Iroh. Is the matter urgent…?"

"Only an old man's desire to have breakfast with his favorite nephew. He must be sleeping very well, if he can rest past the dawn."

"Just so." The servant's smile flickered. "May I do anything for you, Prince Iroh?"

"Only tell your Lord Husband to take great care of any mink-cats he should be so fortunate to find, tame or otherwise."

The servant hid another smile, and bowed; he inclined his head in return. Captain Izumi followed as he left.

Iroh was not looking for anyone in particular. But he was looking for a certain *type* of person. The training grounds at dawn proved excellent for this.

"General Daichi," he greeted, as the man took a break between sets.

"General Iroh," the man's bow was, perhaps, a bit too low for General-to-General. Even for General-to-Prince. But then, he had served under Iroh at Gaipan and Luoyang, when they were both new officers. That sort of thing was not easily forgotten, either in word or bows.

"It is good to see you well. I heard there was an unexpected number of talented benders in Gaoling."

The General scoffed. "Street rabble. Some kind of underground fighting ring that thought *patriotism* could substitute for *discipline.* They surprised us the first time; we made sure there wasn't a second. The worst part was listening to them *boast."*

"I can imagine," Iroh chuckled, thinking of a certain young traveling companion.

"Of course, now the Fire Lord's convinced there's a whole den of badgermoles under those streets just waiting to boil up. Won't even let me march my men back through a city they've already conquered." Daichi always had been the sort of officer who needed to vent before his fires ran too hot.

"It sounds as if he is concerned for your people."

"He's a General doing a Staff Sergeant's job. That kid needs to learn to delegate before he snuffs his own flame." General Daichi seemed to recall, very suddenly, that he was speaking to *that kid's* uncle. "No disrespect intended, Gen—Prince Iroh."

"General will be quite fine, General," Iroh winked. "My nephew has had some issues with delegation in the past. Is he getting very far behind in his work?"

" *No,"* Daichi growled. And began gesticulating, with a few flames for emphasis. "He's at every meeting, he reads the Agni-cursed *minutes* for every *other* meeting, he comes to the *next* meeting with records and annotated *notes,* he has the archivists and the clerks researching every idea anyone says that he thinks has merit, and if we, his trusted advisors say it then he *assumes* it has merit even when it's that idiot admiral and his spirit tales—"

"I have heard the Fire Lord has, perhaps, not been getting much sleep."

"He sleeps?"

Ah.

Daichi was tugging at his goatee. Iroh was mildly charmed to see that the grey-haired General still had the nervous habits he'd picked on him for as a young lieutenant.

"And why does he trust us at *all?* We're his father's advisors, not his. Waido and Kwang-su and I were on that council that got him challenged to the Koh-forsaken Agni Kai, but he just sits across the table every day and *doesn't execute any of us."*

The General had quite a bit of venting saved up, Iroh inferred.

"If he's smart, he'll clear court before we turn on him. Install his own advisors. People he can actually trust, not—not *us."*

"*Would* you turn on him, General?" Iroh asked, as mildly as such a question could be asked.

Daichi blinked like he'd been slapped. "Fuck no."

"Perhaps he is right to trust you, then."

The General looked thoroughly baffled by this concept. He literally threw up his hands. "But he *shouldn't!"*

It was, perhaps, the most reassuring thing Iroh had seen since watching all of his children return from the day of the comet, with only a broken leg and a few burns between them.

"I'm not even sure he *does,"* Daichi said, much more quietly. "He just… doesn't care, as long as what we're doing is in the interests of the nation."

They exchanged lighter pleasantries after that. Brief ones; Daichi was very intent on punching more fire around before the day's meetings began.

Iroh bowed, General-to-General, and left the man to do so. Captain Izumi followed, all the way to the kitchens.

"Don't you even start," the chef barked.

Iroh retracted his hands back into his sleeves, and positioned himself somewhat farther away from the delicious morning dishes already lining up on the counter. "Ah, Master Jae-Jin. I see you are as generous as ever."

The chef aimed a cleaver his way, more as a gesture than a threat. Presumably. "You've got a reason for being here. Otherwise you wouldn't be bothering my staff in the middle of breakfast."

"Of course. I just wished to make sure you knew that all the Avatar's meals should be—"

"Vegetarian. I dug the Air Nomad recipes out of the archives yesterday. If you've got a point you'd better get to it."

Iroh winced at the death of subtly, but acquiesced. "I hear my nephew is favoring work over sleep. Is he eating?"

"More than he did when they first dragged him out. I'll get the meat back on him."

"It was very unfortunate, how—"

"You're about to dance around the point." The meat cleaver struck the cutting board, and did what meat cleavers do. The tuna-pus looked just a little more dead. "Don't."

Iroh fought the urge to wince again. "Dragged out of where, exactly?"

The chef paused. Narrowed his eyes. "Don't hear much Fire Nation politics off wherever traitors hide, do you?"

Wincing, it seemed, was Iroh's new hobby. "Not as such."

"Prison. Now get out of my kitchen. And if I even *think* you're here to hurt the Fire Lord, poison's the *best* you'll get."

"Thank you for your concern for my nephew," Iroh replied, with a humble bow.

"Your nephew." The cleaver took off the tuna-pus' head, with somewhat more aggression than culinary ends demanded. "You been earning that, *Uncle Iroh?* His Majesty has been the whole summer without an ally in this roach-snake nest. Before the comet and after. Way I hear it told, his *uncle* choose the Avatar over him. Before the comet. And after."

Iroh was almost certain that a tuna-pus did not need to be gutted twice, particularly not so… thoroughly, but he did not think it wise to mention this to the chef. With another bow—much more silently, this time—Iroh left. Captain Izumi followed, exactly the appropriate amount of steps behind him.

"I know what you're doing, you old dragon," the guard captain spoke. "Stop snooping and talk to your nephew."

"Would he answer?" Iroh asked, without turning around.

The captain replied very neatly by saying nothing at all.

"Why was Zuko in prison?" This received a similar reply. "Was it house arrest?" He looked back for this question, and caught a single murderous glance directed his way.

"This isn't the way to the Fire Temple."

Neither were their other stops, but she had not commented on them.

"It's the way to the Fire Lord's rooms. I had thought to see if Zuko is awake now." Iroh smiled. "Unless, perhaps, there is something I should know? The Fire Lord *did* give me full use of the palace, I am quite sure he would not mind—"

"Princess Azula is in the Fire Lord's suite."

"We heard she was crowned," Iroh said. "She and my brother sent out quite a few hawks: Fire Lord Azula, and Phoenix King Ozai. Did Zuko challenge her for the throne? ...Did the Fire Sages revoke her claim? ...Did she step aside for him?" Though he turned to watch closely, her expression remained the same for all these options. "I am simply trying to understand the situation, Captain Izumi. You can see how this would look quite strange to an outsider."

"Are you an outsider?" she snapped. Then she took in a deep meditative breath, and let it out. With her next breath came her default answer: "Ask the Fire Lord."

"Which one?" Iroh smiled benignly. The guard captain continued her meditative breaths. It was, perhaps, a good time to *actually* visit the Fire Temple.

Captain Izumi followed him inside. She did not, however, follow him into the family shrine. Iroh knelt, and looked for the first time in three years upon the ashes of his wife and son.

"I'm home," he said. "It has been a very eventful summer. Ah, but you would want me to start further back than that. Zuko—you remember your cousin Zuko—did… something foolish. Something that I allowed him to do, to my regret. And I think I have continued to allow him and allow him, and it is only when I have left him to himself that he has found his way. But I am skipping to the end again…"

There was nothing quite like the sun in Caldera. He knew the angles of every shadow outside, simply by the feeling of it above this roof. Approximately thirteen degrees had passed by the time he'd given his dear wife and Lu Ten the basics of the situation; about an hour, in Earth Kingdom terms. They listened quite respectfully. He promised to visit again soon, presuming Sokka did not get them kicked from the Fire Nation today. He would tell them all about his *unique* young friends the next time. Lu Ten would have liked Toph. And he would have *liked* Katara.

(It was hard to picture Lu Ten as he would be now: a grown man, no doubt already married, and much too old to be flirting with pretty Water Tribe girls no matter how compatible their tempers. Then again, perhaps he would have taken after his father with regards to flirting...)

"I hope I am not interrupting, Prince Iroh," a man said. Though he already knew he was not, for he had timed his arrival in the alcove for the moment after Iroh had risen from his final bow to ancestors and god.

"Not at all, Sage Fujio."

The man was old—older than Captain Izumi, who had been a young guard in Azulon's court when Iroh had been running around leaving spark-marks on the shoji doors. When he had been an only child wishing foolishly for a little brother to play with (and, perhaps, to blame certain fires on). Sage Fujio had known Sozin. And what must that have been like, to be the moral counsel of the world's most effective murderer?

Sage Fujio was old. Too old to waste breath on small talk, he had once heard the man tell Ozai to his face, after Ozai was already Fire Lord. Iroh was surprised the man had lived to see the next Fire Lord crowned. This surprise was unrelated to his age.

"Prince Iroh," the sage said, "do you still support your nephew?"

"I do."

This too the man had already known the answer too, because it was abundantly clear that Iroh's conversation had been between himself, the spirits of his family, and this man lurking in the shadows. The sage inclined his head, by the barest of acceptable margins.

"The boy needs a regent. Talk him into it, and take the role. You have our support."

"As I did when my father died?"

The sage stared down at Iroh, where he still knelt in front of the shrine. "If you had wanted the throne, you should have challenged for it. We cannot support those who will not support themselves."

For the fourth time that day, Iroh fought the urge to wince. "Why has a regent not been chosen already? Zuko is only sixteen."

"The age of majority for the royal family is fourteen."

"How—? Ah. Azula. Ozai changed the laws for her." This was not a question.

"It appears the Phoenix King did not wish for a regent to stand behind his daughter."

"Likely he intended that position for himself," Iroh agreed.

"The girl crumbled on her first day. The boy will follow, unless someone shares his burden. But we cannot force a regent on him unless he himself first changes the law. Convince him to do so."

"My nephew is stubborn, and independent. If he refuses?"

"Then do what is right for your country and your family, for the first time in your life. Take the throne, and let that boy *sleep.* A few years training as your heir and he might even survive this. We are running out of viable heirs, Prince Iroh; I do not want to break this one. He's… not his father. He's not *you,* either."

Yes, Iroh was *very* surprised that Sage Fujio had survived Ozai's reign. But then, his brother never had spent much time consulting with the spirits.

"You have our support," the sage repeated, and turned to leave. Their small talk was over.

"Why?" Iroh asked. "Some are saying I chose the Avatar over my own nephew. Would I make the sort of regent you want?" Or would the sages take the changed law, and place someone else besides Zuko?

"He still trusts you," Sage Fujio said. "You are, perhaps, the *only* one he trusts."

It was not a burden Iroh was ready to pick back up. Not when he had failed the boy for three years, and all the things he had not said had split them apart under Ba Sing Se. It was a city where he lost sons.

Zuko had apologized to *him.* Had welcomed him back into the palace, unquestioned and—aside from one unsmiling guard captain, who Iroh sincerely doubted was acting on her Fire Lord's orders—unrestricted. It was too much trust for a new ruler to have, particularly in an old man who'd earned his traitor posters. Iroh had never prepared Zuko for court, because the boy was never supposed to *return.* The Avatar was gone; and then he wasn't. Zuko was never to set foot in the Fire Nation again, never even to join his family's ashes in the shrine; now he was Fire Lord, and Iroh still did not know how.

Avatar Aang was very nearly a master of fire. It was time for Iroh to return to his family.

He bowed once more before the shrine, then left. Captain Izumi followed him back to the courtyard.

Chapter End Notes

I really really wanted Captain Izumi to tell Iroh all about Ozai throwing lightning at his own son and then shoving him into a lightless cell to be forgotten. It was in my chapter notes. But Izumi took one look at that scene and was all "I don't discuss the Fire Lord's business," and I could not change her mind. Dammit Izumi, why you gotta have integrity?

Chapter 11: Trust (3)

Chapter Notes

That moment you realize you can't re-read a chapter you just wrote because you haven't actually written it yet. *sighs and smashes at the keyboard*

PS: The number in the title will make sense in a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zuko woke up in a sunbeam, feeling cold. Why was the sun even over here? ...Because he'd slept in late and his servants hadn't woken him. Again.

He sat up with a sigh, blanket still tucked around his shoulders. Waking up late meant no time for meditation. That was… okay, it was fine. It wasn't like his inner fire was raging out of control since the eclipse. He wouldn't have time to stop by Azula's room either, though, and that meant she'd probably light something semi-important on fire by the end of the day. What was even left in her rooms *to* burn?

She'd find something. She always did.

What else? He could still have breakfast. He'd just order it into his first meeting; no one ever complained about food trays appearing, they just thanked him for his generosity and emptied the dessert plate before he had a chance to get there. What *was* his first meeting? He felt like he was forgetting something really important, like—

Like a bison landing in his courtyard yesterday. Like uncle, who hadn't said he'd forgiven him but hadn't shoved him away, and maybe that was good enough. Like the Avatar wanting their colonies just because. Also, apparently Toph could tell when he was lying? That would be more impressive if *everyone* couldn't tell when he was lying. But if it was a general skill, how much would it take to get her in his staff…? He probably shouldn't start the peace negotiations by poaching the Avatar's earthbender. Probably.

...Wait, had they taken her along because they'd *assumed* he'd be lying? No, of course not: they must have brought a *blind twelve year old* for her amazing fighting prowess.

Zuko knocked his head back against the bed stand. He briefly considered asking the servants for another few blankets, and just going back to sleep in a warm little bundle. But he wouldn't have gotten away with that when he was five, and he certainly couldn't now.

He settled on the next best thing: slipping out of bed so quietly that he could get dressed without anyone offering to assist him. He managed to get his hair done without stepping on a single creaky board between the wardrobe and the mirror, too. He'd done his own hair for three years: shaving a perfect diamond on choppy seas was a lot harder than tying up a basic topknot, he didn't know why the servants got so *fussy* when he did it on his own. Even if that one stupid strand always ended up coming lose. Putting in the crown was harder: if he didn't get it just right, it got all lop-sided and floppy, and then he got all cursy, and then—

"Are you awake, Your Majesty?"

—And then he got caught.

"...Yes."

"Do you need any assistance dressing?"

The answer was always going to be no. Except for those super-formal robes, which had too many layers for any one man to keep track of. "...Just with my crown."

Lady Huian opened the door, bowed, shut the door. Somewhere in there, she managed to cast an eye over every minor wrinkle and marginally unstraight seam, and radiate disapproval at all of them without ever saying a word. She simply walked over, took the crown, and had it perfectly positioned with one stab of its pin. He didn't even have time to finish flushing.

"Your esteemed uncle was looking for you," she said. "He wished to know if you would have breakfast with him."

"He did?"

She smiled at him, which was when he realized *he'd* smiled first. "Yes, Your Majesty. He stopped by on his way to the Fire Temple."

"And you didn't wake me up?" Smile gone.

"He did not ask me too, Your Majesty. My impression was that he had other errands to attend to." She fussed with his robe collar, giving it a tug that had no visible effect but suddenly it *felt* completely different. Like everything fit just a little bit better. Before he could bat her hands away, she'd also evened his hems and re-knotted his belt so it didn't crease the fabric underneath. "I believe he's back in the courtyard by the guest rooms, if Your Majesty wishes to take breakfast there."

"Yes. That would be… yes." He tried not to twitch too much as she brushed invisible lint from his shoulders. "Please have food brought. For the Avatar's group as well, if you haven't already."

"At once, Your Majesty." She bowed, and opened the door, and very pointedly didn't *stop* bowing until he'd given up trying to out wait her and walked through it. She shut it behind him.

Captain Izumi was waiting for him outside. Zuko's shoulders slumped, just a little, as she fell into step behind him. Guarding him in a brightly lit hallway of his own palace, *within sight of three other guards.* He didn't address her, which meant she couldn't politely address him—

"Your Majesty. If I may have a word?"

But the senior captain had been wrangling Fire Lords before he was born.

"Yes, Captain Izumi?"

"With respect, sir, Prince Iroh should not be given full freedoms during his visit. His ' *trip to the Fire Temple'* took him to nearly every corner of the palace."

"You followed him." It wasn't a question; more of a sigh. "Did he do anything to warrant your suspicion, Captain?"

"He asked a lot of questions. About your circumstances, Your Majesty."

He would. Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. "...I'm not hiding anything, Captain. And Uncle belongs here. You'll need to get used to him, if he stays." If. He… probably didn't want to. Zuko would understand, if he didn't. "Don't you have actual work to do?"

"That's what junior captains are for, Your Majesty." Captain Izumi never smirked, but she had a certain extra confident way of walking that served the same purpose. "If you'd like, I can show you how I organise my staff. I imagine delegation at the palace is somewhat different than on a navy ship."

"I… might take you up on that. When I get time. It must be nice having people you can trust."

Her stride lost its smirk.

"I didn't mean— I trust you, Captain Izumi."

He did. And so had Azulon, and Ozai, and Azula (Well. Maybe not Azula.) So would whoever came after him. But until… *that* happened, he trusted her. The palace guards were one of the few things he didn't have to worry about managing. And it didn't really matter if he still wasn't sure whether she'd ordered her guards to bring him up from the prison or they'd

just *done* it, or whether her face had closed down when she first saw him because she was appalled by the state he was in or appalled at having an untrained ruler dropped on her. He just… wasn't going to ask. It didn't matter. If he went around not trusting everyone who'd spit at him when he was unwanted or banished or an outright traitor, there wouldn't be anyone *left.*

They were almost at the courtyard. Someone was firebending; the sound was distinctive, and something in him wanted to join in and feel what they must be feeling, the rush of fire that would actually make him *warm* and the ingrained movements that didn't take any thought and wouldn't get him killed if he messed up because it was just practice. The rest of him was already steeling for what he knew he'd find.

Uncle was training the Avatar.

(Not waiting to have breakfast with him.)

He stood and watched for only a moment. Long enough to see how effortlessly the monk moved; still the airbender grace, but with a solidness to it, a flow to it, a readiness to charge forward to it—his stances were all firebending, but the way he moved between them was a mix of all four styles that shouldn't work but *did* and made it look like they'd belonged together to begin with, that it was stupid to ever treat them as separate.

(They were practicing an advanced set, one that Zuko had only just started to learn before… before finding *the Avatar.* Another prodigy. How had Zuko ever thought he could be a worthy teacher for him? Of course it had to be Uncle.)

Zuko didn't interrupt them. He just skirted the outside of the veranda behind them, past the bison who was lumbering to its feet and looking at him *really intently,* into the room they'd used yesterday where a servant seemed to have been waiting for the express purpose of opening the door before the Fire Lord could. Zuko made a point of bowing his thanks, which seemed to leave the man even more chagrined than if he'd just let Zuko open it himself.

Then he ignored—tried to ignore—the wooshes of fire and occasional laughter and the sounds of the Avatar's other companions waking up. He opened his work folder, and… worked. Some of his councilors were going to join them today, and he needed to have at least *some* idea of what his own thoughts on the peace process were or he'd end up agreeing to

research a dozen suggestions that he knew he was against but didn't feel comfortable turning down on the spot because they would make them sound so *reasonable.*

Outside, the Avatar laughed sheepishly. Uncle gently corrected him on some form.

(Zuko had never been good at firebending, *never.* It was good he woke up late so he didn't waste any time on it, it wasn't going to help him come up with plans to retrain excess troops for civilian jobs anyway, and what were they going to do about the factories at Aizuwakamatsu and Sendai? If they were cutting back on production of tanks then they didn't need *both,* but that was a lot of jobs that would be lost for civilians, did they need to retrain them *too?* And where was the money for this coming from, if they weren't getting payoffs from the *smart* Earth Kingdom kings who'd been funneling in please-attack-somewhere-else money for a hundred years?)

Captain Izumi cleared her throat in warning. This was the only reason he didn't jump when Uncle spoke.

"Good morning, Zuko. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah," he said, focusing on the paper in front of him. "More than I should have."

"Would you care to join us? We are about to begin the Phoenix-Crane set."

...Zuko knew he knew that one, knew he was *supposed* to, knew Uncle considered him proficient in it, but he suddenly couldn't remember what the opening kata was. It had been awhile since he'd been able to meditate, and even longer since he'd gotten a chance to bend. And the last time he tried, still weak from prison, his chi had… not responded how it should.

(He was not going to let out pathetic weak puffs of flame next to the Avatar's firestreams, not going to prove in front of everyone-and-their-bison that the Avatar was a better firebender than the *Fire Lord.)*

"No thank you. I… have some things I need to catch up on. I ordered breakfast, if you wanted to eat together."

"What an excellent idea. I'll let the others know."

The others. Right. "...I should really get this done. Before we eat."

Uncle paused a moment more, his shadow in the doorway. Then he made one of those agreeable sounds of his that might mean *I admire your work ethic nephew* or *you are making poor life choices right now nephew,* but Zuko had never been able to tell them apart. Maybe because it had always been the second, and he'd just never realized it.

A small swarm of servants brought breakfast not long after. One of them put together a plate for him before he could even protest, either on the principle of the matter or on *how did they expect him to eat all that.* He wasn't *that* hungry. Was it physically possible to be *that* hungry?

Snoozles carefully watched what the servant put on his plate, then put twice as much of the same dishes on his own.

Another servant started to slip Zuko's work folder to the side. A slammed elbow caught it, and a glare sent the servant bow-scuttling away. It was patently obvious that none of the Avatar's group knew what to say to him. He needed that folder, so he had something to stare at, so they had the excuse that everyone wanted not to talk to him at all. ...Though he was going to watch Snoozles out of the corner of his eye. His bad one, so it was a little blurry but less obvious.

"Appa looks really lonely, so…" the Avatar edged towards the door, and fled. The waterbender and her brother followed without even pretending to have an excuse.

Uncle stayed. So did the earthbender; she sat down next to Zuko at the head of the table, distinctly ignoring the lack of another seat cushion or the existence of personal space.

"Is there a reason you're smirking, Sparky?"

"I'm *not.* And you're *blind."*

"Uh-huh. Your heartbeat picked up when Snoozles grabbed his food, and you've got this *hum* to your chi."

She was smiling like she already knew there was a joke. Like she wouldn't spoil the punchline, she just wanted *in.* And it wasn't like he was trying to poison the stupid peasant, he hadn't even *done* anything, Snoozles had done it to himself.

"...He's eating the same things I am."

"Yeah?"

"The things the servant thought I'd like."

"...Yeah?"

"Does Water Tribe cuisine have ghost-pepper-chillies? Because that's what's on the fire-salmon."

She cocked her head to the side. A grin slipped over her face. "And here I was starting to think you *weren't* evil."

He didn't know quite how to take that. But… it didn't seem to be a bad thing. And he didn't really mind that she was sitting so close, it was just weird that she'd *want* to.

"Hey, did I put any of that stuff on my plate?"

He helped her find safer options, as outside the peasant made a sort of gurgling scream. Zuko did not laugh, he absolutely did *not,* in the interests of international relations he confined himself to a snort. But Toph and Uncle and the Avatar did, and when the waterbender rolled her eyes it wasn't at *him.*

"No, I am *not* healing your tongue."

"But *Katara—"* the peasant whined.

And before Zuko quite knew how it happened, he'd actually eaten all his food. And maybe he didn't *quite* need to ask the servants to pass his compliments to the chef, particularly for the excellent fire-salmon, but it made Toph snicker. And Uncle smiled behind his teacup, Zuko was almost certain he did.

"Send my compliments, too!" the Avatar shouted, from his bison-adjacent seat in the courtyard. "That was *amazing.* I haven't had coconut-melon tofu in a hundred years!"

Somehow Zuko was taking seconds, too. The tuna-pus sashimi was *extremely finely sliced,* but really good. Not as chewy as usual. Almost… tenderized?

"You should try some of this, Uncle," he said.

Uncle… winced? "Tuna-pus does not agree with me, I'm afraid."

"...Oh. I'll, ah, talk to the chef—"

"I am quite certain the chef already knows."

This wasn't exactly the conversation he'd wanted to have with Uncle. He didn't know *what* he'd wanted to say, but… not this.

But he hadn't pictured the entire Avatar circus (minus one lemur) being within hearing distance. Maybe Uncle hadn't either. Maybe that was why he was being so *watching-thoughtful* without actually *saying* anything.

"Sparky, grab me more of those bean things."

"They're called—"

"Bean things. Grab."

Zuko served-not-grabbed her another helping of snap-edamame before one of the servants could beat him to it.

The peasant stomped into the room and sat down. On Zuko's other side. Which was a lot less comfortable to have in his personal bubble than the twelve-year-old non-combatant who *didn't* seem to hate him. Zuko leaned back. Just a little. And found the twelve-year-old's elbow *in his spine.*

"Hmm," Snoozles said, leaning in even closer.

"Can I… help you?"

" *Hmm.* You are not lighting me on fire yet."

"...Did you want me to?"

"I thought it was just a fluke yesterday, with the complete sleep deprivation and the trying-to-poison-us-instead-of-fight-us—"

"I wasn't trying to—!"

"But you're still doing it today, and it's *creepy.* How did becoming the worst person on the planet, aka Fire Lord, *mellow you out?* More importantly, is that spicy?"

Zuko didn't even know where to start on that, especially when the peasant had just answered his *did you want me to light you on fire* question with a resounding *yes please.* He grit his teeth, for world peace. "No. It's not spicy; it's not seasoned at all, it's just fish-alopod. Would you like some?"

"Yeah, sure." And the peasant *stole a piece off his plate.* And put it in his mouth. Using his fingers, the barbarian. And then he *talked with his mouth full.* "I notice I am still not on fire."

"You just need to ask," Zuko snapped.

"No thanks," Snoozles said, and did it again.

Zuko snatched away his plate, and shoveled tuna-pus into his mouth. He set the empty plate down with a pointed ceramic *click.*

A servant promptly refilled it, and set it back between them.

"Heh," the peasant smirked. His fingers twitched.

He got half a slice, and a near impalement on Zuko's chopsticks.

The servant refilled the plate *again.* "It's good to see you eating, Your Majesty," she smiled serenely. "And it's so *nice* to have a poison taster again."

She bowed, and retreated to the corner of the room she'd been waiting in.

Zuko felt the blush creeping up his face. At least the peasant didn't look much better. They both pointedly ignored the plate, even when Snoozles'—it had definitely been Snoozles'—stomach growled.

"You know," the peasant said, making a token attempt to keep his voice down for possibly the first time in his life, "your servants are a little less *servant-y* than I'd expected. They act like that with your dad or Blue Fire?"

"...Azula?"

"Yeah, Crazy Blue."

Zuko winced, but let that go. It wasn't like he *knew.* "No. This is just… with me." Because they knew he was barely a ruler at all. Un-banishing half the staff on his first day as Fire Lord was not a good way to instill a proper sense of fear.

"Huh." He stole the tuna-pus plate so casually, it was like grabbing food was just an unconscious reflex. "I think they like you."

If that's what *audacious disrespect* meant, then Snoozles must be his biggest fan. Zuko snatched the plate back, and tried to make this conversation a little less ridiculous.

"The prisoners. Is there—you looked—" He couldn't exactly say the peasant looked *upset* over it, yesterday. He wasn't the one trying to be rude. "Are there certain people in particular you're concerned about?"

Snoozles narrowed his eyes. "Oh, so you can specifically target them? Get yourself some hostages?"

"No! Just… do you even know if they're alive?" He was pretty sure that cut deeper than any insult he'd actually tried to give. "I'm not trying to threaten you!" And that came out louder than he meant, and now the Avatar and the waterbender were *looking,* and the bison was getting to its feet. "Just… if you get me a list, I can have the clerks look into it. Make sure they're okay."

"Hmm. *Hmm.* Hmm."

The peasant's hand suddenly snapped out, and Zuko was hunkered over the plate before he realized the *actual* target. Snoozles grabbed paper straight from his work folder, and Zuko's favorite brush and he wasn't even *holding it right,* there was no elegance in the characters he drew (and no formal schooling in the Southern Water Tribe, so it was actually impressive he wasn't outright *illiterate* but that wasn't the point—)

"Hey!" Zuko made a grab for the paper, which left his plate undefended from little blind girls, how did she even know where it was, and why weren't the servants or the guards *helping.* He snatched it back from her grabby fingers and rage-ate his fourth helping of tuna-pus, and started to remember what being full felt like.

The peasant was scrawling a short list. A short list that was going to make his clerks wish he'd left them Azula-banished.

Everyone captured from the Southern Water Tribe ever

Northern too I guess

Why not the Kyoshi Warriors while you're at it

All invasion troops from the Day of Black Sun

The peasant looked immensely pleased with himself.

"Any—" Bad manners were *contagious.* Zuko shut his mouth and chewed and *swallowed,* then tried that again, which somewhat ruined the sarcasm. "Anyone *else?"*

"That'll do," the peasant said. "For starters."

Zuko folded the paper and held it out to the servant. "Have the clerks prepare two lists. Names and status should be delivered to Ambassador Snoozles. Names and locations for those still alive should be delivered to my office."

She bowed, and left.

"What." the peasant said. " *What?"*

Zuko scowled. "If you seriously expect me to give you a list of prisons to break into—"

"Not that. Well that too, but— *What?"*

"...What?"

"Ambassador *Snoozles?"*

Zuko realized he'd made a horrible mistake. It came with its own creeping feeling of dread tingling up his fingertips. Like the moment before Azula threw lightning, or the instant he caught the *indescribable glee* on the earthbender's face.

"You don't know his name. You've been trying to figure it out from listening to us but you *don't know his—"* She lunged across the table, across Zuko's *lap,* and slapped a hand over the peasant's mouth. "*Do not tell him.* If you wreck this for me, I will wreck *you.* Are we clear, Ambassador Snoozles? *That goes double for you, Sugar Queen.* And I will train you into the *ground,* Twinkletoes."

Out in the courtyard, the rest of their group had never stopped paying attention. Zuko should have never hoped they would.

"Ambassador…" the Avatar started.

"...Snoozles?" the waterbender finished.

The blind girl lowered her hand, and sat back up.

Her victim's shoulders were slumped in defeat. He stared balefully at Zuko. "Are you just really bad with names, or something?"

Toph grinned. "Hey, what are the rest of us called?"

"Um. Toph, Katara. Avatar Aang." The bison groaned, and took an alarming two steps closer to the room that he *knew* it couldn't fit in but that wouldn't stop wind, and he'd never been clear on how much speech the Avatar's spirit animal could understand. "Uh… Appa?"

"How about our lemur?" Toph's grin was *alarming.* "He's in the Earth Kingdom right now, but you remember him, right? The Team Avatar MVP. *Everyone* knows *his* name."

...It was a fruit. Ume? Nashi? "Momo!" Too excited. He slapped a hand over his mouth. Which looked *idiotic,* so he dropped it to his lap. And just... resigned himself to blushing. Forever.

"The Fire Lord seems pretty good at names to me, Ambassador Snoozles."

"...You're never not going to call me that, are you."

"A brilliant deduction, Ambassador Snoozles."

Zuko shifted his gaze between them all. Nobody… nobody was actually *mad.* There was some more yelling, but it was friendly yelling. Which wasn't the kind Zuko was used to. He didn't smile, he *didn't,* he was very practiced at not smiling. But he relaxed a little, and his heartbeat slowed back down to pre-he'd-messed-up levels, and then the blind girl laid off the peasant for just long enough to *smirk* at him.

"...What?"

"Not a thing, Sparky." She reached out and stole his half-full rice bowl. He stole it back, and shoveled the last grains into his mouth.

The servant was back from handing off not-Snoozles' note, and the servant *smiled,* and the servant refilled his bowl like she was trying to *encourage* this behavior. They'd dress him and open every door he so much as glanced at, but they wouldn't defend his breakfast from vulture-wolf children?

"Could you please bring more food before one of them chews my hand off?" Zuko snapped.

"At once, Your Majesty."

"Man," Toph said. "Your people really *do* like you."

"...Are you metaphorically blind, too?"

It wasn't a joke. She laughed anyway.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was almost from Sokka's POV.

Almost-Titled: Zuko Needs To Eat Something So Sokka Knows What's Not Poisoned

Almost-Subtitled: No Seriously, Stop Pushing the Food Around and Eat, This Is Driving Sokka Insane

Ultimately that is all you really need to know of Sokka's POV.

Chapter 12: Trust (2)

Chapter Notes

These chapters are supposed to be short. SHORT, Toph. Like YOU. DAMMIT TOPH.

Edit August 2021: Rewrote the Toph-touches-Zuko's-scar part of this chapter. I have it on good authority (AKA: my actually blind/low vision commenters) that the whole face-groping thing is very much a sighted-person fixation, not a thing blind people actually do. It is, in fact, one of those "what the hell, sighted people" tropes that really shouldn't exist. Edited out the face-touching; please keep the excellent reviews (and constructive criticisms) coming, Toph is amazing and I want to write her well. Of all fandoms, Avatar is a place blind readers should feel themselves represented. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Toph met Sparky yesterday. Today, they were friends. Maybe tomorrow she'd let him know.

Eh, maybe not.

Point was: Toph *liked* Sparky. Which was weird for a lot of reasons, up to and including *'the last time she was in this palace she'd come to kill his dad, but ended up fighting his baby sister instead.'* Made her wonder what he'd been up to that day. But not enough to ask, because he didn't seem the type to answer unless she got him good and threatened-with-boulders first. Probably should wait until this peace thing wasn't so fragile. Or at least, until she got him somewhere his guards couldn't hear him yelp.

Because really. The kind of person who called becoming Fire Lord '*not that exciting'* and *meant* it, while the people around him were having minor heart attacks just thinking about it, was the kind of person who had *stories.* And she was definitely going to get her grubby mitts on them, sooner or later. Probably after he realized they were friends, too.

So yeah, she liked the guy who'd made her friends miserable for months. Liked him, because she *got* him. What she didn't get was why everyone else... didn't. Sighted people were always pretty constrained in what they saw—letting things like *walls* and *complete darkness* stop them, pssh—but Zuko was *right there* and the sun wasn't as warm as it had been, but it was definitely still up. So why wasn't anyone else *seeing* him?

"Fine! Go through the city!" Sparky growled, over in the corner of the courtyard where one of his advisors had cornered him as soon as they took a break from negotiations. "But I expect your troops to *behave,* General Daichi. If I hear one report..."

"You have my word of honor, Your Majesty." The guy's weight shifted really far forward; a bow. His voice was steady, boring-ish, but his heartbeat had just gone from *medium-fast* to *humming-gazelle* for a few beats. Judging by context, Toph was betting that was an internal fist pump of '*Finally.'*

Sparky stomped back to the empty meeting room and his pile of rustling papers. Which made him the only one *not* out in the courtyard hobnobbing, or at least grabbing things off the food trays for dinner. As soon as he was away from everyone else and focused on *something* else, his heartbeat smoothed out and slowed down. Sparky, Toph was learning, needed to always be *doing* something. Downtime stressed him out almost as bad as Katara did. Toph didn't know exactly what was going on there—it was a facial expression thing, and she didn't *get* those—but she had a feeling Sugar Queen had been shooting him *looks.*

Toph didn't know what made a *look* intimidating, but whatever it was, Katara had it. So did Toph, which was a sign that all was well with the universe. She could make Twinkletoes stop chasing butterflies and get back to practice just by lifting an eyebrow; she could make Snoozles gulp so loud she heard it through his *feet* with the right grin. She was smaller than the others, but she was *scarier.*

Odd thing was, whatever *look* she had, it didn't work on Sparky.

"What city?" she asked. She hadn't tried to sneak up on him, but she hadn't tried *not* to, either. He *twitched,* and his heart did that really unhealthy off-beat thing she'd been picking up on since her feet touched the courtyard stones yesterday. She hadn't heard something like that since Aang was freshly zapped and comatose. She'd tried to talk about it loud enough that his guards would hear, but none of them seemed to be *doing* anything about it, and Katara didn't seem in the healing mood. So Toph did the only thing she could do right now: she grinned the same grin that made Momo fly screeching of to Appa, and made Uncle pause mid-tea-sip.

Sparky paused, too. And *relaxed.*

It was bizarre, but she kind of liked it. People hadn't been this calm around her since they thought she was a helpless blind kid shuttered up in her parent's home.

"Gaoling," he answered. She liked his voice: a lot of people had generic ones, voices that would blend in with a crowd. Sparky's was gravel-rough, like ground just waiting to get kicked up and punched at someone's face. Which was a compliment. There was probably some fire-and-smoke metaphor that would suit him better, but eh.

"Gaoling, huh." She sat down next to him. Kept on the grin, and tossed in crossed arms. "Hey. Guess where I'm from."

His weighted shifted forward; less on the ground, more on the table. His elbows knocked against wood, softly. If that wasn't a head-in-hands with bonus repressed groan, she didn't know *what* was.

"Good guess," Toph said.

"I didn't say anything."

"Didn't you, though?" She almost gave him enough time to reply, because it had become abundantly clear from the first time Sokka insulted him that Sparky didn't *get* rhetorical questions. As hilarious as it would be to see how deep he would dig *this* hole, she took pity, and walked over whatever he was about to say. "So you're sending troops. Through my hometown."

"...Yes?"

She pushed him (...verbally), just a little harder. If there was one thing she'd learned in twenty-four hours with this guy, it was that his fire just needed a little stirring to flare. "You're sending troops *through my hometown."*

"I don't *want* to!" There he went. Weight back on his butt—sitting up straight again—and the little *wooshes* of air and micro shifts in weight as he gestured way too wildly to be socially acceptable. "But I've looked at the maps, and General Daichi's *right* —it's either the city, or the caves, or the mountain passes, or the *swamp.* I can't risk my people in caves or passes, not with the Earth Army rallying behind them. And that swamp is just— *no."*

"So you're sending troops. Through my hometown."

Weight all the way forward and a single *thunk.* She reached out a hand to confirm it and, yep, that was him slamming his head on the table and just kind of leaving it there. She gave him a pat-pat.

...Whoa, nice hair.

Meanwhile, every guard in what she was going to assume was 'sight' tensed where they stood. Heart rates shot from base rate to the brink of action. Because her hand was on their Fire Lord's head, and she'd broken a few bones when she'd come through here on the day of the eclipse, and the guards reacted to her grin like *normal* people.

"I tried," Sparky said, mostly to the table. That nice voice of his was all muffled. "I couldn't find another route, not without sending them through more dangerous territories. And I can't… I can't *do* that. They aren't going to fight, they're just going to… march through. Nobody should be hurt. Umm, nobody else. This time. Unless they fight back, which they probably won't, because they already did… last time. And. It didn't work?"

Her parents had been visiting her dad's brother-he-didn't-really-like over in Jinhae when the fighting started, inspecting their newest warehouses. They were safe, which made it safe for Toph to feel a little bit amused by this instead of a lot a bit of rage. The rage was still *there,* sure, because all the servants she'd grown up trying to run away from *had* been in town, and all the guys from the Earth Rumble who were her personal punching bags, not the *Fire Nation's* —but. But Sparky hadn't been on the throne when all that went down. She had a rule about only punching people for what *they'd* done. Or when she liked them a lot, and their guards were looking the other way, which his stubbornly *weren't.*

"Thanks for not keeping us as a colony, I guess." She patted him one more time, just to prove she could. (And made a note to talk her dad into importing whatever Sparky used for

shampoo. There were middle-aged women and more than a few gents in the Upper Ring of Ba Sing Se who would pay a fortune to have hair half that silky. The colonies, too, if they marketed it as the Fire Lord's own stash.)

...And okay, she was taking her hand off the Fire Lord for real now. His guards relaxed again, if just barely. Weird thing was, *he* didn't care either way. Mostly. He'd kind of tensed with the first pat, like he'd expected a *hit* . And then he'd… '*given up'* seemed a little dramatic, but it was the phrase that came to mind. There was this way his heart beat—when Uncle hesitated around him, when Aang instinctively stayed out of grab-the-Avatar range, when Katara popped her water cork under the table just to watch him jump. An uptick in speed, then one of those purposeful firebender breaths, and then it just… leveled back out. But not in a good way. More of a *he'd expected to get hit, but he hadn't tried to dodge her hand* kind of way.

Toph really hoped she was reading that wrong, but hope was more Sugar Queen's thing. So was asking what was wrong. Toph didn't *talk,* she got things *done.*

"Are you done guilt tripping? Because I'm pretty sure your servants are going to force-feed you if you don't go grab some food."

His weight shifted back to sitting, and there was the brisk silk rustle of him straightening out his robes. She had a feeling he was giving *her* a look. Judging by how all her friends reacted to him, Uncle included, his looks were the *best.* Too bad for him she'd been born immune.

"Sparky, go grab some food so I can steal off your plate. Or are you going to leave the little blind girl to paw her way through that whole buffet trying to find something that *won't* burn her face off?"

That got a reaction. The way his heart started hiccuping was painful just to *listen* to. She didn't get it, which meant either she'd missed something or it was a sighted person thing.

"...Blind. Right," he said, like he was talking to himself. And he didn't quite calm back down, but at least Toph didn't think she had to earthbend Katara over here right now and *make* her heal him. "I'll, uh. I'll go get something for you."

There was at least one nearby servant who heard *that,* because they started walking just a hair too fast to be polite, all the way across the courtyard. They managed to have two plates ready before their Fire Lord could even get there. And, of course, insisted on carrying said plates back to the room for him. Sparky was left standing by the food platters, being rather firmly warded off by *another* servant who was asking him if she could *Get something else for you, Your Majesty?*

Poor guy wasn't allowed to serve himself. Toph remembered that particular joy, from twelve-years-minus-the-last-few-months as a Bei Fong.

Sparky grumbled a no, and then kind of stood there, acting like if he stayed long enough they'd let him have freedom and choices. That wasn't how being a rich kid worked.

"Could you *not* get all buddy-buddy with Fire Lord No-Concessions?" said Sokka, who'd come over as soon as he'd seen the Fire Lord's plate undefended.

"Why don't you leave the nicknames to me, Ambassador Snoozles. And do you *really* think the food is poisoned?"

"It's more the principle of the matter," he said, and she could *hear* him chewing. Snoozles had many good points, none of which Toph would ever admit to, but his eating habits weren't one of them. Toph had ditched a lot of her rich-girl etiquette lessons, but not sounding like a komodo-rhino chewing cud was one she'd kept. That noise was just… *ugh.* Snoozles kept talking, which at least helped cover some of the sound. "There's just something really satisfying in stealing Zuko's food. Also in stealing the Fire Lord's food. And apparently these are both the same person now, which is still fundamentally upsetting to me, so I'm going to take my petty revenge where I— *ow spicy ow."*

Sparky was across the courtyard. His feet were pointed towards them, and he was probably watching them, but he wasn't coming back to the room. His heartbeat and breathing were doing that *he'd-given-up* thing again. It was better than the *needed-imminent-healing* thing, but also… not.

Toph turned her palm up, and flicked a wrist. A pebble from the courtyard obligingly decided to *not* be in the courtyard anymore.

"*Ow!"* Sokka said, for reasons unrelated to spice levels. "What was that for?"

"Go get your own food, Ambassador."

"Are you *seriously* taking his side?"

"I am *seriously* thinking that stealing the Fire Lord's food is not helping. Do you *want* peace?"

"He's not giving us peace. He's giving us *ultimatums.* Keeping all the colonies? Building *more* strongholds in the Earth Kingdom, along the shiny new Fire Nation border that, oh right, *they* get to pick?"

"It's the first day, Ambassador Snoozles."

"The first day. And every day he can drag this out is another day in the Fire Nation's favor. He's consolidating his hold on the land they already have, and he's hoping we're too stupid to attack before he's got whatever crazy politics are going on here sorted out, and probably rebuilt their airship fleet, and oh hey *built strongholds in the Earth Kingdom.* Which is now part Fire Nation. *What part of this sounds like peace, Toph?* If we let them have toe-holds, they're going to toe all over us! Even if he's completely sincere—and seriously, do we need to get your feet *checked?* —then whatever evil little children he leaves behind to inherit are just going to restart the war in a few decades, from an even stronger position. That's *not* what we fought for. ...And now I'm picturing Zuko-children. Which implies *Zuko-sex.* And do you think you could just go ahead and hit me with a boulder now, I do *not* need that mental— *ow!* I wasn't serious!"

It had only been another pebble. Baby. If he talked less, maybe he wouldn't have the most easily targeted head in their group.

Still. Sokka wasn't stupid, even if he was great at acting the part. He'd… made some good points. He'd also kept his voice low, and the guards and the servants and the old guy advisors

and even the rest of their Gaang weren't reacting to anything he'd said. But Sparky had really good hearing, apparently. *Really* good. Almost-as-good-as-hers good. Either that, or he felt about three times heavier on his feet for reasons completely unrelated to this conversation, despite the fact that he hadn't started talking to anyone else. And nobody else had started trying to talk to him, or even really stepped closer.

"All I'm saying," Sokka said, chewing on Sparky's food again, "is I have always been in favor of Katara's plan. The one with the ocean trenches, specifically."

He was only half joking, and Toph didn't think the joke half was the *killing Sparky* part. And… they'd talked about this back before they left, when Uncle and Aang were *very* not-in-the-same-building. Because she and Katara and Sokka, they hadn't been expecting Aang to come back from his part of the comet fight with Ozai still breathing. And yeah, killing people was terrible, and no one should force kids like them to do things like that—but what did Aang think *they'd* been doing, up in the airship fleet? Why did *he* get to stay all clean but they had to—

And *Ozai.* Why did he get to live, when all those low-level soldiers, the guys just steering the ships or working in the engine rooms, the ones whose heartbeats had been so scared and their shouts had sounded so *young,* why'd they have to *die?* Was it only *royalty* that got special no-kill attention from the Avatar? She loved Twinkletoes, he was like the flighty loveable annoying awful amazing brother she'd never wanted but suddenly had, but—but he could be such an *airbender,* and *knowing someone's name,* being able to put a face and a history to them, didn't make them more worthy of living. A lot less worthy, in Ozai's case.

So it hadn't seemed too crazy to her when Katara and Sokka had pulled her aside, and asked if she'd be up for doing what needed doing on this trip, if it… needed doing. Because they couldn't just keep putting Fire Lords in prison, someone was going to come along and break them *out,* Ozai was still a problem and he was going to keep being a problem until Aang let the man be executed. And Zuko was his dad's angry-violent son, the one who'd been first in line to drag a twelve-year-old pacifist off to face lifetime imprisonment and probably maiming in the Fire Nation, and he'd attacked any place that even *looked* like it had Aang in it with no regard for civilians, and sure Iroh had told them about how he'd gotten that scar but even if he hypothetically still cared about people and Ozai hadn't burned it out of him, it was *Fire Nation* people he cared about. Which was not exactly a good thing for the whole *balance and harmony, yay* thing. So yeah. She'd been in. If… *if.* And Fire Lord Zuko was making it really easy, with how close he kept letting her get. Letting all of them get, even Katara, even though he might just save them all the ethical dilemma and have a heart attack from mere *proximity* to her.

Toph hadn't really met Sparky, back when she agreed to… to *that.* And now he was standing over there listening to Sokka joke about sinking him in the sea, and his heart rate was *slowing.* Like he just expected it, like this was something he understood, like it was nothing to argue over. There was something really, really wrong with that. With him.

She didn't think it was the kind of wrong that needed killing.

"I think he's really trying, Sokka," she said. Because he and Zuko *both* needed to hear it.

Sokka paused to actually *think.* He always did, when she used his real name. That was why she saved it for special occasions.

"...Yeah, well. If he actually wants this to work, he needs to try *harder."*

Sparky turned away, and his breath hitched, and he *laughed.* Just the one laugh. Which the servant by the food didn't seem to know what to do with, because she couldn't hear what he was laughing about.

"Can I please just make my own plate?" Sparky asked. "I don't *need* help."

And wasn't that just the worst lie ever, in every single area *except* picking out his own dinner. Maybe there, too—it was hard to judge weights that light from this distance, but she didn't think he was putting nearly as much food on that plate as the one the servants had made for him. The one Snoozles was so helpfully eating, and while the servants had liked that little bait-Sparky-into-eating game they'd played at lunch, she wouldn't be surprised if Sokka's food *did* end up poisoned if he tried *this* again.

Zuko finished grabbing enough food to starve a kitten-bunny, and just kept… standing there. Kind of poking at things, giving that poor servant false hope that he was going to take more. Toph thought he was staying away because of Sokka, but then Sokka finished his one-plate conquest of the Fire Nation and went off to save Katara from some old guy. Or save some old guy from Katara. And Zuko… kept standing over there.

He really liked his eavesdropping, didn't he.

Uncle was in a circle with three of Zuko's advisors. One of them was the let's-march-through-Gaoling guy, and she was pretty sure the other two had been introduced as generals, as well. Which made sense, because Uncle was one too. A Fire Nation General. And the way they were talking and laughing, these guys were probably war buddies of his. And Toph realized something she'd always known but didn't like to think about, that Uncle had *killed people.* Her people. Probably a lot more than anyone else here. The Dragon of the West had been good at his job, and those guys laughing with him… they all remembered that, because it really hadn't been that long since the siege of Ba Sing Se. There was *respect* in their voices, in the way they deferred the conversation to any story he started, in the way their bodies slanted more towards him than to anyone else in the circle. They *liked* him. And there stood Fire Lord Zuko, far enough away that they probably thought he couldn't hear them, and Sparky's heart rate was up again and he was taking those deep breaths that both he and Uncle used. Uncle used them to meditate, but Sparky… Sparky just *used* them. All the time. Like he needed them just to get by. He'd felt the same way yesterday when Azula had lightninged something and they'd almost attacked him; he felt the same way whenever one of his servants or his guards or his advisors got too close. Or her: he'd felt that way when she patted his head.

And Toph was starting to figure out that that was what *trust* felt like in him: that *trust* and *trying not to panic* had become the same thing for Sparky, somehow, and he trusted Uncle the most of everyone here but he still… needed those breaths. He stood there poking at the food platters for another moment, another breath. Then he turned away from Uncle reacquainting himself with the court, fitting with them more naturally than Sparky did, and he made the choice *not* to eavesdrop on them. Which was the most trust she thought it was physically possible for him to give. He walked back towards her, and she could tell by the nervous uptick in his heart when he *couldn't* hear them anymore. But she still could. A little.

Uncle clearly knew exactly how good his nephew's hearing was, because it wasn't until Zuko walked away that the old general steered all that talking and laughing to *serious* politics. And… and Toph, for the first time ever, wanted to hit him with a rock. Because Sparky *was trusting him not to do that.* And yeah, all the talk she could make out seemed to be for Sparky's benefit, but there was an undertone to the others' voices and stances like maybe they *appreciated* having an older royal back in court. Bei Fongs were just up-jumped merchants, but it didn't take a proper noble to know that was *dangerous.*

Sparky sat back down. A little further from her than she'd sat from him, which she quickly scooted over to fix. This was *her* personal space, not his. He'd learn.

And she *grinned,* upping it to levels that could make even *Appa* shuffle his feet when he looked at her. Sparky let out a breath, and she was pretty sure that fabric rustle was a relaxed shoulder slump, and *seriously,* were his survival instincts so bad they'd wrapped back around the other side? Because Toph was *scary.* She knew she was.

"...Do you not like the food? I'm sure the servants would *love* to get you something else." A little bitter there, Sparky?

She'd forgotten she'd had a plate, actually. Not that she'd admit it. "Just waiting for you."

"Thanks?"

So they ate together. Or at least, Toph ate. She was hearing a lot more paper rustling than chewing from Sparky.

"What *are* the the penalties for force-feeding the Fire Lord?" Toph asked. "Hypothetically."

"Sorry. I just… I have to get this organized. There's a lot of things I need the clerks to research before we meet again tomorrow. Like some of Sn—of, uh. Of the Water Tribe Ambassador's suggestions."

Since Snoozle's suggestions had primarily been on where Sparky could shove it, Toph wasn't really sure what research that required. She gave him that *unblinking blind girl* stare that seemed to freak people out so much. He either wasn't looking, though (and seriously, what was with sighted people and only being able to look in *front* of them?), or he was as weird about that look as he was about everything else. Toph took a grudging bite of something fishy, and—

And realized maybe the servants *hadn't* liked her stealing Sparky's food at lunch, even if it had just been a game to get him eating, because she was pretty sure this was that fire-salmon with extra fire-sauce that had gotten Snoozles earlier.

The words that came out of her mouth were appropriate for an Earth Rumble. Not so much for the daughter of a Bei Fong.

"...Huh." Sparky said.

"*What?* Did I burn your virgin ears?" Apparently Toph's growly voice didn't scare him anymore than her *look*.

"I've heard worse," he said finally, and a little smugly. And though she didn't know what a smirk looked like, she sure knew what one *sounded* like. "I think I *said* worse, when I was your age. Uncle, ah… Uncle yelled at the crew for that. A lot."

Oh yeah; sailor at thirteen. She'd forgotten what Fire Father of the Year had done to him.

It hit her with a jolt: she'd *forgotten what the Fire Lord had done to him.* Uncle had told them about the Agni Kai and the scar, and she'd… she'd joked about faces burning off right before she sent him to get food. Because she'd forgotten something that no one else having a conversation with him ever would. Sometimes, very rarely, being blind *sucked.*

She should probably apologize.

...Ha, *no.*

Toph leaned over the table, making sure her elbows ended up right on top of that paper stack of his. "So I've been wondering why people suck so hard at reading you. Do you just have a really good mahjong face?"

"What?"

"Or, what, are you wearing a mask?"

"I… no?" And that was a *not-right-now* blip in his heartbeat and twitch of his arm like the one Snoozles did when he was reaching for his *sword.* And wasn't *that* interesting. Something to follow up on later. For now:

"So what, does the scar just make you super scary?" Oh boy, that indignant whoosh of fabric as he straightened up was a *yes.* "Well you don't scare me."

"You're *blind."* His voice was half-way between a snarl and a laugh, but not the good kind of laugh.

"How big of a scar are we even talking, here? Because I've got some awesome ones. Check it out, this is from my first fight. Cheap shot, but it left this cool dent on my hip, see?"

"Please keep your pants on."

"It's literally a butt, relax."

"You are literally disrobing in front of my court."

"If they're watching, that's their own fault," she said. That was how their sight worked: they could look away anytime they wanted and things just wouldn't exist in their brains anymore, even if they were standing right next to them. Crazy. "It's okay, you can admit I have you beat. I have the *best* scars."

"You do not have me *beat."*

"All right, how about this one? I was playing with the badgermole kits and things got a little rough. I think they forgot I don't have fur. Don't worry, I bit back."

There he went, dropping his head into his hands again. "How is this happening."

She punched his arm, to make sure he was looking. It was just her *shoulder*.

"Pretty wicked, right? I had to tell my parents that I got bit by something in our garden; they kept me inside for a month while they tried to figure out what it was." Their poor blind daughter couldn't have been expected to see the foul beast, after all. "Look, it's shaped like a jaw, and it's got these bumps where the teeth were. I wish tattoos worked like this, then I could get textures everywhere."

"Maybe you could just bite more wild animals."

"Is that the Fire Lord's official decree? Man, I can't wait to tell everyone I got your *royal approval."*

"Please don't."

She made sure she was grinning her *best* grin, the one that made Snoozles shove Aang towards her as a meat shield and *run.* "So? Do I win?"

"You can't *win* at having scars."

"Says the loser."

He huffed a laugh. Again: not the good kind of laugh. Then he took in a breath, and held it, and let it back out. "It's half my face."

...She wanted that to be an exaggeration, but that wasn't what his heartbeat was saying.

He'd been a year older than her when his dad did that to him. *Why* weren't they killing Ozai, again?

"Huh," she said. "That explains it. I hear faces are *important* or something. The scar makes everyone half-blind to you, doesn't it?"

"...I guess?"

"It's all right, Sparky. *I* can see you."

And wow, he did *not* know how to handle anything even *approaching* a compliment. That right there was a full-body splutter. She reached up and gave him another hair pat. He stiffened. And then… didn't. Just didn't.

He really, really wanted to trust her. And Uncle. And his generals, and his guards, and even Twinkletoes and Snoozles and Sugar Queen, though maybe he really *shouldn't* with Katara. He wanted to trust, but it wasn't the same as *actually* trusting.

I give up, his heart said. Or *I know you're going to hurt me.* Or *I want to trust you.* Like those were all the same, for him. She'd agreed to help Katara and Sokka *kill* this guy if it came down to it; this guy who couldn’t defend his personal space from a twelve year old, who got bullied by his own servants, who sat still and hid his flinches when she reached for him.

Well, even the best earthbender in the world could make mistakes. Non-bending-related ones.

Out in the courtyard, Aang and Katara and Sokka and Uncle and all the advisors really didn't know how to deal with watching her nearly moon the Fire Lord. Even less than his guards did, and that was saying something.

"I have a proposition for you, Sparky," she said. And she straightened out her clothes all properly again, sheesh. "For every blind joke you make, I get one burn jab."

"...What?"

"Come on. The navigation joke, 'better with a blind girl'? You've been dropping them at *least* once a conversation."

"Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No no no. No wimping out on me. Do you know how many people blind joke around me? *No one,* because they *wimp out."* Which might or might not have been related to her ability to immediately inflict pain on them. Like she'd said: wimps.

"I. Um. I'd just… rather not make any more blind jokes?"

"Wimp. Fine: then for every burn jab *I* make, *you* get one blind joke."

"Doesn't that mean you're just going to keep insulting me?"

"Should have taken the first deal. Too late now. Burn jokes for blind jokes, and you'd better not cry like a little boy about it. Do we have a deal?"

"Can I *stop* you?"

Toph grinned. And for once, he *did* feel a little scared about it.

Oh yeah, they were friends.

Chapter End Notes

I can't be the only one who watched Zuko's changing hair and kept really wanting to touch it. That ponytail like a cat toy, then that adorable chick fuzz, then the shaggy mess of God Zuko Use A Comb, then… them Fire Lord locks. All I'm saying, is. Zuko's hair had more character development than most shows give their lead characters. If Zuko's hair was Daenerys Targaryen, it wouldn't have burned down a city.

Chapter 13: Trust (1)

Chapter Notes

So it seems like some reviewers are developing an irrational fear that something bad is about to happen. I would just like to take this opportunity to reassure you all that this is fine, everything is fine.

casually ticks the Trust Countdown down

We're going to zero, in case anyone wondered.

Dinner was over. No one had killed anyone. His ministers were unhappy that he was sitting down to any kind of serious talk with a group of children (specifically, a group of children who didn't even technically speak for their respective nations, and who were very clearly aligned against the Fire Nation.) (Also technically, children who had taken down a small army on their own and who the rest of the world seemed willing to *listen* to.)

The Avatar's group was unhappy with everything else. So. Negotiations were starting on equal ground, at least?

Zuko ran a hand over his face. He paused, fingers on his scar, which had *not* lost because it wasn't a competition. (And if it had been, he would have *won.*)

Toph was… an interesting kid. Had a great intimidating look on her, but he'd grown up with Azula. His sister had more teeth behind her smiles at two than Toph did at twelve. It was actually kind of cute, how scary the earthbender was trying to be.

Had she said Sokka's real name on purpose, or had she just not realized he could hear her?

...*Was* Sokka his real name, or just another nickname she was trying to trick him into saying out loud? Ugh.

Zuko dropped his hand. Took in a breath, let it out. Okay. Back to organizing his notes. There were… a lot of things he needed his clerks to research. Not right now; it was too late, he couldn't ask them to work through the night. But if he got things ready for them, they could start on it first thing.

This would be easier to focus on if there wasn't a very quiet verbal scuffle happening outside his door.

"I'm still awake," he snapped, which made both participants pause.

"Your Majesty," one of his guards said, "Prince Iroh is here to see you."

Zuko's heart skipped a beat. In… kind of a literal way. His physician said it was nothing that bedrest and avoiding lightning strikes wouldn't cure. His physician had a much better *intimidating face* than Toph, but since the man couldn't run a country or redirect lightning for him, enforcing doctor's orders was more like a wish list than a to-do.

"Send him in, please." Zuko straightened his robes, but left the crown off. Made his papers a little neater. Should he stand? That might be too formal, but it would show respect, and he had *years* of disrespect to make up for—

The door opened while Zuko was half-way out of his chair. He hurried to straighten.

"Good evening, Zuko," Uncle said. "I hoped you would have time to speak?"

"Yes; of course. Take a seat. I'll, ah, send for tea. Guardsman Chan-ri, would you please see to it?"

The guard frowned at Uncle's back. And she didn't quite shut the door until Zuko used *his* intimidating look.

"Thank you, nephew." Uncle took the seat opposite him. Zuko sank back down, too. The crown and a pile of notes sat on the table between them. Uncle's gaze flicked over both before settling on him. "I'm glad we finally have a chance to speak alone."

"Yeah. Me too." He was fidgeting with his robe hem under the table. He *stopped that,* it was just Uncle, he didn't need to be this nervous.

"How are you, nephew?"

"I'm okay. Just… adjusting. How are you? Did you… did you get hurt at all? The reports say you fought with the Avatar against the airship fleet—-Which, which isn't an *accusation,* you did what you had to do, I—" He wished he'd been there, too. Or he had wished it. He might have been, if his own plan hadn't… *hadn't.*

"I was quite safe, nephew," Uncle interrupted, with just the start of a smile. "Thank you. And you?"

"I, uh. I didn't fight. I didn't even see the comet, actually."

"Because you were in prison?"

Zuko jerked up just a little straighter. His bruised shoulder shot a jolt of protest. "You… know about that?" Of course he knew about that, he was *Uncle.* And Captain Izumi had warned him that Uncle had been *uncling* this morning.

"Only second hand. Nephew, why were you imprisoned?"

Because he'd somehow thought that standing up to Ozai would be a good idea, instead of running as fast as he could the moment he couldn't look his father in the eye and say *I am your loyal son.* Because he'd tried to save Uncle, but Uncle had already saved himself.

Azula had a lot of fun the first few days, coming down to mock him. *I see your time as a peasant has made you more considerate of others, Zuzu. How nice of you to walk yourself into prison.* She'd gotten bored pretty quickly, though. And the last time he'd seen her—the last before he was Fire Lord—she'd been angry. *Really* angry. She wouldn't tell him why, but she'd stood with blue flames on her fists and asked him what *loyalty* was. He hadn't answered. Without fire of his own to defend him, trapped in a cell small enough she could just flood the whole thing with flame if he said the wrong thing, when he didn't even know what she was *talking about,* it… hadn't seemed wise.

His cell hadn't been as nice as Uncle's. It wasn't the kind of thing he should compare, and it wasn't a good thought to have. But Uncle had… kind of trashed his level of the prison, and pointed out a few *security flaws.* They'd been more careful, with Zuko.

Which was to say: Uncle had gotten a window.

"...Is something funny, nephew?"

He swallowed back a laugh. "No. Sorry. I'm just… a little tired. What was the question?"

"Why were you in prison?"

"Oh. I, uh. Said some things fath—Ozai didn't like." He couldn't tell Uncle he'd gotten imprisoned trying to save *him.* He just… couldn't. Couldn't tell him that he couldn't even rescue his own Uncle right. And maybe if Uncle knew he'd been coming that day, he would have waited, or they could have met somewhere and left this all behind together, and maybe if Uncle knew about those maybe-ifs it would hurt him.

(And maybe he wouldn't even believe Zuko, not without his living lie detector around to verify that Zuko wasn't just trying to play for sympathy.)

(Seriously, they'd brought a *blind twelve year old* to keep him honest? A blind. Twelve year old.)

For just a moment, Zuko felt *warm* again. His inner fire was there, and ready to burn something-anything(-anyone).

"What things, Zuko?"

They were still having this conversation. Zuko didn't want to be.

"Does it matter?" he snapped. "It was just another stupid plan I didn't think through. Like always."

Uncle looked at him long, and steady enough to make him squirm, like he was thirteen and raging at another failed Avatar lead again. "Zuko. How did you become Fire Lord?"

Zuko shrugged. His shoulder didn't like it, but his fire didn't mind the pain. "Azula had some kind of breakdown. Ozai was gone. So they dug me out."

Maybe if they hadn't been across the table from each other, Uncle would have hugged him then. He looked like he might. Zuko didn't know if he'd have let him, and was glad he didn't have to find out.

"Do you work this late every night, nephew?"

"...Not every night."

Uncle made his *I know that you are being creative with the truth* face, and Zuko tried to keep the other half of that sentence off his own: *Not every night. Usually even later.*

Uncles closed his eyes, and let out a long breath. "Nephew. You are not alone in this."

"...What?"

"I had… much time to think, in my own prison cell. And after. If I had known that you would oppose Ozai, perhaps…"

The end of that sentence was everything Zuko did and didn't want to hear. Uncle didn't finish. But he did keep talking.

"If you would have a foolish old man, I would like to remain in the palace, even after my companions depart."

I'm nominating Iroh as our palace spy, the Water Tribe boy's voice echoed in his head. But Uncle wouldn't *do* that. Well, he would. And already had. But… but only because he cared.

Zuko had to swallow before he could answer. "I'd like that. If you… don't need to be anywhere else."

"Zuko," Uncle said. And there was such warmth and admonishment in his voice that Zuko knew for sure he'd have hugged him then, if the table wasn't there. And… yeah. Zuko wouldn't have minded.

They talked about other things then, about how the Fire Sages were apparently plotting behind his back to get a regent in, but the generals who kept second-guessing his every idea were… surprisingly pleased with his performance. More than they thought they'd be, with Ozai's least favorite and child. Which was… a compliment?

(Uncle didn't say anything about General Waido's little remarks as they'd stood chatting at dinner, the *polite surprise* he'd expressed that *General Iroh—my apologies,* Prince *Iroh* —had not returned to the palace sooner. That his *experience* would be an invaluable asset for a Fire Lord…

"For a Fire Lord to call upon, you mean," Uncle had replied, with a smile just as benign as the general's own.

"Of course, my Prince."

And Zuko knew how bad he was with people, but even he could catch the catch the subtext there, and the way that General Kwang-su stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Waido and, oddly, the way Daichi stood a step further away. And the way they were all doing this right in front of him, because either they thought he couldn't figure it out or they knew it didn't matter what he heard.

...Or, if he was being generous, they just didn't realize he could hear them. His bad ear had been turned to them and he'd technically been pretty far away.

But Uncle knew how good Zuko's hearing was. So… Uncle had to know he'd heard. That was why he didn't bother saying anything now. And he hadn't *done* anything, he'd only *supported* Zuko, he was… Zuko could trust him. He could.)

But.

"I don't need a regent," he frowned.

Not when Uncle kept being *quiet* while the Avatar's group talked. Not when Zuko didn't know what he thought about the colonies or the war. Zuko knew he wasn't doing the best job, but he wasn't going to roll over and give up what power he had unless someone *better* for the nation came along.

"I will not force the matter if you do not wish, Zuko. I will be here for you, in whatever way you need me. As your uncle, as your regent, as your counsel."

"Could we just… start with 'uncle'?" Zuko asked.

Table be damned, Uncle *did* reach across to hug him. It felt warm and safe, so warm and safe that Zuko didn't realize his own inner fire had doused itself again until Uncle pulled away.

"Thank you, Uncle," he said. And tried not to look as cold as he felt.

Uncle still saw something. Something that made him smile fondly, but not sit back down. "Why don't you get some sleep, nephew?"

Why? A lot of reasons. A *lot.* But it wasn't the sort of *why* that expected an answer.

"I will," he promised. And he would, as soon as he was done with this. "...Uncle? What's the Water Tribe boy's name?"

Uncle's eyes *twinkled.* "Oh, you mean Ambassador Snoozles?" He chuckled. "Forgive me, nephew. I fear you are underestimating the terror Miss Bei Fong represents."

...Uncle was no help at all. But maybe that was what uncles were for. Zuko rolled his eyes, and stepped out from behind his desk to open the door for him, because *that* at least was something he could do right. Uncle looked surprised, but thanked him. Guard Chan-ri looked surprised, and didn't.

She'd never sent for tea, he belatedly noticed. He wasn't sure which of them the insult was intended for.

Chapter 14: Trust (Break)

Chapter Notes

> If you have not been warned sufficiently by the Trust Countdown, there is no warning you at all. Enjoy, kids—the next few chapters are nothin' but sunshine and rainbows and frolicking puppy-kittens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Head Clerk looked like he was about to pass out, either from pride or embarrassment. His Fire Lord—the first Fire Lord to directly visit his office during his tenure—didn't notice.

"This is wonderful. Really, great work." Zuko paged through the report, right there at the desk of the lower clerk who'd been compiling enough copies for everyone at the negotiations.

"T-thank you, Your Majesty," the clerk had been sitting as stiff and proper as it was humanly possible to get, but she still managed to jump a little higher upon being addressed.

"Did you get the projected trade numbers…?"

"Appendix E, Your Majesty."

Zuko flipped to the back, and read, and sagged in relief. Idly he rubbed at his arm, trying to work out a slept-on-it-wrong ache. That was what he got for sleeping in the first place. "This is *exactly* what I needed. Thank you so much. What about the Earth Kingdom…?"

Millimeter by millimeter, the lower clerk relaxed, and answered her young lord's questions. Centimeter by centimeter, the other clerks leaned over from their own desks to listen in.

"Really, Your Majesty, you could have just sent a servant," the Head Clerk fretted. "It is beneath Your Majesty's notice to—"

"You've all been working on this for a *week,"* Zuko scowled. "Of *course* I'm going to thank you in person."

(The Head Clerk flinched, then schooled his expression blank. The lower clerks shared grins amongst themselves, then hurried to do the same before their superior noticed. Either of their superiors.)

"Did you look at the third section yet? We ran a forecast on how different tariff levels would affect the treasury, and—" the lower clerk gave her boss a subtle smirk as she saved him from further compliments.

"This is... it's just… it's perfect. Thank you." Zuko didn't notice he was clutching the report to his heart. The clerks definitely did. Then Zuko bowed to the office at large, and the Head Clerk choked.

"We should have the prison lists by next week," the lower clerk said. "Some of the older records on the Southern waterbenders were from prisons that already shut down, but we think we located the copies. They're getting shipped over now."

"Thank you," Zuko repeated. And bowed again.

He wasn't entirely certain the Head Clerk was *breathing* anymore, and he wasn't sure what he was doing wrong. Should he… bow lower? But he'd already worked his way up to young-royal-to-honored-elder when the man startled at his first simple royal-to-subject nod. It was like the more polite he got, the paler the Head Clerk became—

The lower clerk winked. "Maybe you should leave before he faints."

"I… sure?"

A very confused Zuko was escorted from the room by a woman only a few years older than he was. She smiled, and slid the door shut behind him. After a somewhat cheeky bow. Then there was a *riot of noise* from inside the room.

...Maybe he *should* send a servant, next time. His clerks were *weird.* But they did really, really good work.

The Water Tribe boy had been right, at that dinner a week ago—Zuko wasn't trying hard enough to make this peace work. So he'd tried *harder,* and now he was ready to show the Avatar's group how serious he was.

"What is this." Snoozles poked his copy of the report with a skeptical finger.

Zuko scowled, and fought the urge to drag the papers back out of the ungrateful peasant's reach. "I had my people researching potential trade deals we could offer the Water Tribes. The Earth Kingdom, too. We would be willing to offer favorable tariffs on construction materials and staple foods for five years, with open passage for registered passenger and merchant ships through Fire Nation Waters." The peasant wasn't looking impressed. Zuko scowled *harder.* "That means the western routes to the North Pole. Don't you *want* open communications with your sister tribe?"

Snoozles held up a hand to interrupt. (At least one of Zuko's advisors drew in a sharp breath at the casual insult.) "Back up. Fire Nation waters?"

Zuko had remembered to bring a map this time.

"You can't just claim *the entire western ocean!"*

The map didn't please the peasant or his sister or the Avatar, but he was starting to think nothing would. At least his admirals were nodding, looking vaguely insulted that anyone had dared disagree.

"It's the ocean," Zuko said, "between our islands," he tried to break this into peasant-accessible words, "and our colonies. *It's our ocean.* We're already ceding you back the southern and northern seas, and the Earth Kingdom can have the waters up to twenty kilometers from shores they still control. What more do you *want?"*

That was not a question he should have asked.

"You have to admit," the Avatar put in, several demands and *immediate rejections shouted down by generals, admirals, and advisors alike* later, "it's a little worrying to have the country that started the war controlling so many places that would, ah, make it easy to *keep going* with the war. Not that I'm saying you will! But I'm pretty sure the Earth generals aren't going to believe you like we do. And the Northern Tribe's been salvaging your fleet to build —"

" *Aang!"* Snoozles interrupted, but not before both of Zuko's admirals started trying to catch their Fire Lord's eye and give him *we need to raze the North Pole to the ground NOW* stares.

"No," he told them, which left them looking disgruntled and the Avatar's people looking confused, except for Uncle, who was still reading the report and being *quiet.* He'd carefully taken a seat in the exact middle of the two groups, as he had every day since he'd agreed to just be Zuko's Uncle again. And though he was perfectly happy to discuss strategies during breaks or after the meetings ended for the day, his support at the table generally took the form of *not actively disagreeing with his nephew, even though he clearly did.* Zuko had forgotten how *annoying* Uncle could be. It was familiar and infuriating and nice and *ugh.*

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose, and resolved to send his clerks some kind of gift and to *never let them know* how little their work had helped. It wasn't their fault; he'd just… had them researching the wrong things. Apparently. Zuko would... keep trying. These were just the preliminary talks; as long as the Avatar left here *not* actively hostile towards the Fire Nation, it was a win. Even if they accomplished literally nothing else with the extravagant amounts of time they were wasting on this. They just needed to show enough good faith so that next time the other Nations would feel comfortable sending representatives that weren't *legal minors.* That would be… that would be great.

And then they could start this all over again, in a room full of unhappy adults, where he'd be the youngest person at the table and the focal point for a hundred years worth of hatred. Yeah, *great.*

He rubbed at his fingers under the table, trying to work a little feeling back into the tips. Azula was another *great* part of his life. That he'd taken to visiting her when he needed a break from this maybe said everything.

"Hey, Sparky," Toph said. "How about we stop for tea? My ears are sick of people shouting the same five things."

Zuko's entire side of the table bristled at the little girl's presumption. Zuko… felt pathetically grateful for the excuse. Maybe he could sneak off somewhere private and bang his head against a wall. The blind girl winked towards him, like she knew exactly what he was thinking. *Winked.* Who'd even taught her what a wink *was?*

Before Zuko could agree, Uncle was talking.

"I am not certain the Earth Kingdom will be able to afford these prices, Zuko."

Uncle, who had been carefully paging through his proposal since he'd been handed a copy.

But still didn't approve.

"What do you mean?" Zuko turned to the same page in his own report, and completely failed to see the problem. "It's not like we'll allow the merchants to price gouge, not if they want to buy from the central stores. That's just… what it's worth." There were benefits to a hundred years under effective military rule: a fairly complete government control over critical food supplies was one of them.

"Do you know how much of the Earth Kingdom burned, nephew?" Uncle didn't usually call him *nephew* at the table, but he didn't usually miss someone saying the word *tea,* either.

Zuko tugged his map out from under the peasant's elbows. "The airship fleet came in from the coast at the Wulong Forest, and continued inland until they were stopped outside Yangzhou, though the fires kept spreading until—"

"And what type of land is in that prefecture, nephew?"

Thirteen years of tutor drills came spilling out of dusty corners of his mind. "Jiangsu prefecture's primary exports are rice, grain, and other… agricultural products."

They'd burned an entire prefecture of food. At the end of summer; before the harvest, and with no time to replant before winter.

He'd known that, but he hadn't… *known* that. It had only been two months, he'd been focused on getting his own people somewhere *safe,* not on how another country's peasants would eat this winter.

"How bad of a famine are they facing?" Zuko asked, trying not to picture Earth Kingdom villages where food had already been scarce *before* Ozai had decided to just burn things to the ground, and a boy who'd invited him into his home and a family who'd shared their food with him anyway. People who'd hated him for being just a half-starved banished prince. How many curses had they sent to their dusty gods when they heard of the new Fire Lord? They probably wished they'd let him starve.

He knew what it felt like, to starve.

"Bad. Many will die, Zuko. If the Fire Nation makes no reparations, the war *must* continue; the Earth Kingdom will not allow itself to starve while the colonies eat. Returning even some of the land would put food back into Earth Kingdom hands, and show how serious you are —"

"Displace our citizens, and give enemy troops our harvest?" One of the advisors snorted. Better for him to say it than Zuko; it gave the Avatar's team someone else to glare at, for a change. Zuko rubbed at his arm, still trying to make that lingering ache go away.

They were all arguing again, and he just wanted to cover his ears and block them out, why did they all have to be so *loud,* this *wasn't helping.*

" *Stop it,"* he cut in. "If anyone has *concrete suggestions,* please speak them. Those who wish to bark like albatross-seals, the guards can *escort you to the harbor."*

His guards didn't move. Zuko hadn't really meant them too, but it still would have been nice if they'd at least twitched. They wouldn't have assumed his *sister* was joking.

"Well, maybe you can find a way to *share…"* the twelve-year-old said. Not the one he was starting to honestly like; the one who'd fought his father and somehow stayed *ridiculously naive.*

"Share," Zuko deadpanned. "Great idea. I'll just tell my farmers that *this year* we'll be paying sub-standard rates, and shipping their food off to feed *people who hate us,* so that in the spring they'll be healthy enough to attack. I'm so glad the Avatar returned, world peace is *so easy* with your ancient wisdom to guide us—"

"I'm just trying to *help—"*

"Maybe we can trade," Snoozles put in. "You've got daddy issues, we've got your daddy. How many kilograms of rice is he worth to you?"

"Why would—" Zuko drew in a deep breath and did *not* try to convince the peasant, *again,* that bringing Ozai back into the capital was *literally the last thing he wanted.* "How is that even *safe,* giving him back to us? Do you seriously think he wouldn't just take the throne and *immediately* restart the war? Would you *rather* deal with him?"

"I hear you people have a thing about your bending superiority," the peasant smirked. "Hard to be a Fire Lord without any fire."

Another deep breath, because it was always hard to get air when they were talking about Ozai. "...What?"

The monk rubbed the back of his bald head. "I, uh. Took away his bending?"

Zuko didn't understand, for a moment. No one on his side of the table did. The words were clear enough but they— how— that couldn't be—

Uncle nodded, just slightly.

Zuko had never felt so cold in his life, like whatever embers of flame he had left just banked themselves down to coals, trying to hide from what he was hearing.

"You can take away bending," he heard himself saying. "Agni's gift. You can just… take it away."

The airbender was chattering something back, looking *sheepish* but a little *proud,* but it was just… buzzing in Zuko's ears.

The Avatar could take away bending.

Maybe somehow that wasn't as horrifying to waterbenders or earthbenders or airbenders, because the Avatar's group looked a little uneasy (the non-bender still looked *smug,* of course he did, he *couldn't* understand), but the Fire Nation side of the table had *stopped breathing.*

And then they were breathing very carefully, the kind of breaths that stoked inner flames.

Inner flames. Not the earth under their feet or the water of their seas, not the air around them. *Inner* flames. Agni's gift was their heart, their life, it couldn't be snuffed without killing the bender. Even Zuko's little embers were still *there,* could still flare if he could just figure out how. To be completely gone—

How was Ozai still *alive.*

Why would he *want* to be alive, to be this cold for the rest of his life?

How could the airbender sit there talking of peace when he'd ripped Agni's hand from one of His chosen? The Avatar was the World Spirit, but Agni was the *Sun God.* The sun shone on his people and kindled flames in the strongest. Death was death, but to have their souls ripped out and their bodies kept living, beyond the sight of their god—

For the first time, Zuko thought of his father not just as a human being, but a frail one, a *pitiable* one. One who'd been subjected to a twelve-year-old's *mercy* instead of an honorable death.

Zuko was going to be sick. Or pass out. But he couldn't, because the Fire Lord was Agni's will on earth made manifest, the one who *protected* the flames. He squeezed his arm and took too-shallow breaths and ignored his people's glances of concern and… got through it.

Was that what the Avatar intended for every firebender who disagreed with him, who he couldn't control? It—it honestly wouldn't make much difference for Zuko, his flames were almost gone, but what about his generals, his admirals, his captains and lieutenants and common soldiers? There weren't many in his armies that the other nations couldn't call war criminals. For many they'd even be *right.* Zuko had known there would have to be justice along with any talks of peace, but he'd—he'd pictured imprisonment, he'd pictured *executions.* He hadn't in his worst nightmares imagined a monk with *good intentions.*

"Sparky," Toph said. "I really think tea time is a good idea—"

Her voice reminded him to breathe.

"Avatar. I must respectfully request that you leave my palace. Now."

"Are you *serious?"* the peasant squawked.

The waterbender crossed her arms "Told you. They don't *do* families like the Water Tribe—"

And his own people were shouting back, and the earthbender's face was screwing up like she was about to act her age, and he just *couldn't.*

"You came to see if we were serious about peace. We are. I have welcomed you into my home, and you have…" Insulted him at every turn. And through him, the Nation and the God he stood for, but he'd tried to be *welcoming* and *polite* and not *strangle them.* "But we aren't getting anywhere, and you're... you're not even designated representatives of your Nations, you're *children."*

"You're a teenager," the Avatar snapped.

Zuko had heard that one before; less than a year ago, with snow under his boots and the polar wind trying to freeze him and his inner fire warm enough to keep it at bay. It was… easier to remember the snow than the flames.

"I am the *Fire Lord."* Not the banished prince who'd chased them. But he didn't think the people that needed to hear that would listen to weak protests like *I'm not that person anymore.* "Leave; when you find representatives who can *speak for your nations,* please send word. I'll meet with them. But Avatar, you—you don't even know what you *did.* You are not welcome in Fire Nation lands until you do."

Stay away from my people. He wanted to shout it, but he didn't have enough breath and the monk wouldn't have listened, anyway.

Besides. The airbender was doing plenty of shouting for him. "I *spared your father's life."*

"You *destroyed him."* He took a breath in through his nose, and out through his mouth, and very pointedly looked away from the child he didn't particularly like to the one he did. "Lady

Bei Fong. If you ever feel yourself underappreciated, your services would find welcome in my court."

"Huh," she said, looking honestly surprised for the first time since he'd met her. "Truth."

"Yeah, kick us out, that's great," the peasant said breezily. "But the Earth Kingdom generals don't *want* to talk to you, and the Earth King is missing, and you've got *our* Chief locked up or—or dead, and you killed the Northern Chief's *daughter.* Just who do you think you're going to find that wants to talk to you, *Sparky?* We *are* the peace process. Now give us some nice reparations to take back to the other nations so we can prove you *mean* this, and we'll see what we can do to open up some minds—"

Zuko's breath was still short and his chest was starting to *hurt,* but he found enough air to shout. "You did not win the war! Uncle, can you please explain to them how coming to terms *works?* ...Uncle?"

"There will be no peace while the Earth kingdom starves, Zuko. They will have no choice but to attack."

"Let them," General Daichi scoffed. "We'll just beat them again."

Uncle frowned at his old war friend. "A hundred years of suffering is not remedied by—"

If that was a proverb Zuko was going to light something on fire, even if he had to get spirits-damned *spark rocks* to do it. "They want Fire Nation food? Let them surrender to the Fire Nation. Otherwise, their own King can handle it. Once you find him and his *bear."*

That… made the table a lot quieter.

"You are not thinking this through, nephew—"

"Do you think you could do a better job?" Zuko laughed, but it came out more of a snarl-wheeze.

Toph pulled at Uncle's sleeve, insistently. "His heart is doing that thing again. Really bad. *Really* bad. I thought it was going to stop, but it *hasn't—"*

"My heart is *fine,"* Zuko snapped. On principle. It certainly wasn't worse than it had been since this stupid meeting started, and his own people could just stop *looking* at him like that.

Uncle was doing what he did best, and ignoring him. "Miss Katara…"

"Fine, I'll heal the *Fire Lord."* The waterbender stood, with an extravagant roll of her eyes, her thumb flicking the cork of her waterskin.

Zuko's flinch was instinctive. " *Don't touch me!"*

He didn't know when he got to his feet, and he didn't know why he could see his arms shaking but couldn't *feel* them, but he *did* understand why Azula banished everyone. If that was the only way to make them *leave him alone for five minutes* (to maybe feel safe, for five minutes)—

"Well, I tried." The waterbender sat back down. Toph punched her in the arm. Not one of the friendly punches he'd seen her give to all of them, even the lumbering bison, but a punch that almost knocked the girl over.

"Try *harder,* Sugar Queen."

"Perhaps a break—" Uncle's tone was so mild and conciliatory that Zuko wanted to scream.

He settled for shouting. "You are not my *regent,* Uncle. You can't tell me when to *take a break."*

"Miss Toph feels you should see a healer, nephew. If not ours, perhaps your own—"

"What good will that do? He'll just say I need to rest and avoid stress." And, oh, *not get hit by lightning.* Minor details. "Which would be a lot easier if you would all just *leave."*

"Nephew, it has been a long morning. A long *week—"*

Maybe they *should* have taken a break or moved this somewhere private, but if Zuko took the time to change rooms he might not be this angry anymore, and it felt… it felt *good.* He was warm, *hot,* his inner fire was roaring again. Not the guttering spark that could barely redirect Azula's off-handed attempts to maim him but *real* flame. The kind the Avatar could tear out of a person, and was *willing to,* and thought was better than death.

"You don't get to play Fire Lord, Uncle. You didn't *want* to be Fire Lord." There were flame daggers in his hands; he hadn't meant to make them, but they'd come to him as easily as they had in any tantrum back on his ship. His breath control was *shit,* but they still flared in his palms like they belonged there.

"Zuko, you are *ill,* please—"

" *Fire Lord* Zuko. I know no one wanted me to be. I'm just the person sitting the throne while you all figure out who you *actually* want. Father didn't want me, and you didn't even want me to go *home,* and Azula is probably just going to kill me, but—but I'm here now, and I'm going to do a good job at this if it kills me."

The resounding silence at that, the way servants and guards and advisors of every rank all looked like they understood something he didn't—it guttered his flames back down to coals.

He didn't like this. Whatever was about to happen, whatever that shared silence meant, he didn't like it.

(The little earthbender was trying to physically *shove* the waterbender at him, but she'd frosted her shoes to the tatami floors and was refusing to move.)

Uncle stood.

"Fire Lord Zuko. Under Agni's sight and before the court, I challenge you for the dragon throne."

"Uncle?" Zuko thought he spoke but maybe he hadn't said anything at all, because Uncle wasn't answering, wasn't *listening.*

"This is my right as Iroh, son of Fire Lady Ilah and Fire Lord Azulon, Grandson of Mizura and Sozin, whose line is pure and descended from Agni."

"This… this isn't funny."

"The terms are until surrender. The time—"

He caught sight of the Avatar and his group behind Uncle, and their faces were— the waterbender was *vindictive,* the peasant grim, Toph open-mouthed, the Avatar *sympathetic*. And there was only one thing those looks could mean. They *knew* what this meant to him. His face burned with remembered heat and shame and *how could Uncle—*

"You told them. You *told* them? ...Of course you told them."

"Hey, he was just trying to humanize you—"

"Why do I need— How much more *human* do you want me to be, Water Tribe?"

Zuko looked around, but… no one was stopping this, this no one was intervening, he was just as alone as he'd been *last* time he'd been at a meeting with Uncle and the words *Agni Kai* had come up, and he felt like this shouldn't be *familiar.*

"I'm the third Fire Lord this summer," he said. "The Sages will never—"

"The Sages have already given their blessings, Zuko." Uncle was making some weird face, like this hurt him as much as it did Zuko, but he didn't need to be an earthbender to call *that* lie. "...You could still accept a regent. Or forfeit the throne. Please, Zuko. You have been hurting yourself, and I will not stand by and lose another—"

I am your loyal son.

"Shut. Up."

He didn't want to believe this. It was a nightmare, and he'd wake up and… and never tell Uncle about it, because it was too awful, it couldn't be real.

And if he was anyone else it wouldn't be. But Zuko had a lifetime of experience, and he recognized his luck. It had been saving up for this. Clearly.

"That's why you wanted to go to the Fire Temple."

"Zuko—"

"You literally asked permission before going behind my back. I should have seen this coming, right? if I was half the politician my father was, or Azula, or that I *should* be—"

"Please forfeit," Uncle said.

"I accept your challenge," Zuko said.

It wasn't even going to *be* a fight, but he couldn't just… Uncle was *on the Avatar's side.* Didn't anyone else see that? He didn't want his physician and he didn't want to lay down and he didn't want their fake concern or time to think this over, shut up leave him *alone,* he just— Wanted it done.

It was done the moment Uncle said the words; the rest was just theater. Putting on a show for the court, and then he could go back to his jail cell or a ship or wherever else the new Fire Lord decided to put him.

Uncle set the time. It was either an hour later or the next day, but time was slipping again, like it had in prison. The sun was right there, he found himself just sitting and waiting for things to start, staring up at it, wondering why he couldn't feel it anymore than he had in the dark.

It felt about as real as a play when the servant slipped the gold bands up his arms, never meeting his eyes. It was the woman who always made sure his robes were straight. She did the same for his prayer shawl, and he realized he couldn't remember her name anymore.

She wasn't his servant anymore.

She left him alone, which was her job. Zuko let the shawl fall to the ground and stood, which was his. He'd never thought there could be something worse than turning around and seeing father, but here it was.

Zuko fought. He had to, because falling to his knees and begging never worked once in his life and he was sick of even trying. Because his country needed him. Because fucking *never give up without a fight,* Uncle *taught* him that.

Uncle took him down gentle as an owl-cat scruffing her kitten. He held Zuko still as the scowling waterbender approached with her hand on her waterskin. Uncle had ordered Captain Izumi to stand ready to put out any flames, but they hadn't come for Zuko during the fight

and they didn't come now. The guardswoman looked disgruntled at the order; probably she'd rather delegate to a junior captain, now that she'd been freed from babysitting.

The waterbender pursed her lips and knelt at Zuko's side. Whatever she did with that water-gloved hand over his chest felt *wonderful,* because apparently even his body was going to betray him today.

He was laughing. Deep heaving laughs that got stronger after she healed him, thanks for that. He didn't know when that started, but it felt good, too.

"Come on, my boy," Uncle said. "You are going to sleep now, and we are going to talk in the morning. I know it does not feel like it now, but you will heal—"

Zuko slashed out a hand, breaking Uncle's kindly hold on his shoulders. He struggled back to sitting on his own.

"You said you thought of me as your son."

"I do, Zuko."

He managed to swallow the next laugh long enough to speak.

"Thank you for the lesson, *father."*

You will learn respect, and suffering will be your teacher.

And then he was laughing too hard to get up, and… It felt fucking *fantastic,* actually. The look on Uncle's face was almost as raw as Zuko's *everything,* it hurt and he couldn't stop laughing and it *hurt.*

He tried. He fought. He didn't give up.

He still lost, like he always did.

Was it okay to stop now?

Chapter End Notes

All good chapters start with pulling up "Heart Attack Symptoms" on the ol' Google and quietly checking them off. All you sweet summer children who thought a heart attack was mutually exclusive to something far worse, bless your souls.

I absolutely promise this is Zuko's mental health low point for the story. So go ahead and swallow your hearts back down, down where they definitely won't get ripped out again.

Chapter 15: Stay Out of Azula's Toybox

Chapter Notes

Well that got a response. An extremely overwhelmingly holy shit love-you-all positive one. I would like to take this moment to offer warm blankies and hot cocoa and ssh-everything-will-be-okay hugs to anyone who did not yet receive them; they are the standard post-chapter-14 care package.

Now that the reactions are in, I'm allowed to admit I was super extremely Zuko-in-new-social-situations terrified of posting that. But ya'll are friggin' epic and there are 134 comments and counting on that chapter on FF alone, and I know I'm new to this fanfic thing, but that seems like a good sign.

I, um. Also apparently made a lot of people legit cry. Sorrynotsorry. Worse, I sent one reviewer on a Linkin Park bender. There's making people cry, and then there's *Linkin Parking* them. (I love you, Takua. This song's for you, as they say.)

The following chapter was not in my outline. This was written because so many people wanted to see outsider POV reactions, and had really good ideas for them. So. Here is a chapter literally consisting of a round-up of your own we-need-to-see-this-NOW flails, made suddenly plot relevant because you wished for it (hasn't anyone ever warned you about wishes, dearies?) Credit where credit is due in the end notes for who-inspired-what. Congratulations, ya'll just became roundabout SIs! I'm sure that's definitely how that works.

If future chapters get as overwhelming of a response as the last one did, I may not be able to reply to all reviews individually any more. I replied to the first… 110ish? But. But I assumed that everyone would rather have a new chapter than for me to continue replying. For those I didn't get to, and also those I did, and those yet to come: know that I love you and I'm listening and I'm making a quilt of all your kind words and political rantings to warp around myself. You fuel my inner fire. <3<3<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Head Clerk was having a lay down at his desk. Not an actual lay down, but clearly a mental one: he was looking at the same papers he had been since their Fire Lord left. Every now and then he would smile to himself, and then look vaguely horrified.

The lower clerks were akin to a herd of buffalo-puppies left unsupervised outside their pen. Except with distinctly more staying at their desks. It was, after all, still work hours.

"He was just *so sweet,"* the young woman who'd talked their Fire Lord through the trade report said. "I knew he was young, but I didn't think he'd actually *be young.* I just…!"

"Oww, oww my ear. Could you *please* stop making high-pitched noises Jinza, they are not necessary for communication, and can we *please* get back to work—"

"You know you liked him, Takuya."

Takuya pushed his glasses a smidge higher up his nose. And lifted his chin, on general principle. "I don't really think it's either appropriate or safe to like a Fire Lord."

"He seems… different," another clerk cautiously put in, with a glance all around to make sure no court spies had managed to infiltrate the closed room in the last thirty seconds.

"He seems like we might get a raise," Gendou said, crossing his arms. " *What?* He does. Ozai never gave us one."

"Ozai never came down here," Jinza of the high-pitched noises pointed out.

"Can we all take a moment to *appreciate* that His Majesty Ozai never came down here?" Takuya said. "And I would be perfectly happy if Fire Lord Zuko similarly refrained from noticing us, this seems like a terrible precedent to encourage. It's fine when he's pleased, but what happens when—"

There was a distant boom. They all instinctively flinched at the sound of lightning hitting something that was likely semi-important.

"I'm simply saying," Takuya said, "tigerdillo kittens are cute, but they *grow up."*

The echoes of Her Highness Azula's latest tantrum faded. It left considerable quiet behind.

"...So did anyone here get banished?" Gendou asked. He'd authored a paper on the consequences of burning an agricultural prefecture that one of the war ministers hadn't liked, and had gone to *visit sick relatives* for three months. Hadn't come back until he'd heard about the new Fire Lord.

All the other clerks turned to Jinza. She held up her hands in surrender. "I was out delivering the budget report to Lady Huian. Her Highness seemed to think I was one of her handmaidens. 'Who authorized you to be in this hallway? *You're banished!'"* She tapped her chin. "His Majesty gave us back pay for that. Most terrifying vacation I've ever had."

"Can we all, please," Takuya said, "just take a moment to appreciate that we have a room to *hide in?* One that was, until this morning, royalty-free?"

"Can we all agree that the next time a royal is on the war path, Takuya's on budget-delivering duty?" Gendou said.

The clerk's office was not a democracy, but this did not stop the vote from passing.

It wasn't until lunch that any of them had cause to re-open their office door. They took their conversation into the hall (Takuya *very firmly* snatched his glasses back from Gendou, and finger-combed his ruffled hair, and—)

—And they realized the silence around them like rabbit-mice freezing in a too-still forest. Guards stood straight and attentive at their usual posts. Servants scuttled demurely about their duties. Everything ran with the perfect efficiency and familiarity of low-key terror.

Gendou swore, and had Takuya *and* Jinza's hands clapped over his mouth before the words were halfway out.

The clerks did not speculate on the atmosphere. They did not whisper or banter or chat. They walked calmly and respectfully through the hallways, stepping aside and bowing low to those of higher rank, nodding to those they knew, and otherwise blending as closely as they could

with the floor and/or walls until they reached the safest place in the entire castle to find out *what in Agni's name was going on, who or what had died, and had the nobles found a scapegoat for it yet or if they were still looking.*

The kitchen doors opened onto carefully organized panic.

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"You need to leave," the sous-chef said, after checking who was coming through the door. Just the clerks; quiet kids who knew how to keep their heads down and their mouths shut.

"I need to be *here."* The chef gutted another fire-salmon. Such work was beneath him, but he'd been doing a lot more of the *stabbing* prep since Prince—since *Fire Lord* Iroh's return.

"You insulted him to his face, Master Jae-Jin. You need to leave *now."* It was neither a plea nor a request. It was a fact. Between one fish and the next, the sous-chef took the cutting board and the fish basket away.

The chef was left with only his knife and a shaking hand. This could have been a metaphor for his life, but was just reality. "I can't just run. That boy needs us to..."

"It's already done, Jae-Jin." The sous-chef took the knife, too. "Do you have somewhere to go?"

The chef nodded. He didn't say where, and the sous-chef didn't ask. He'd worked thirty-one years under Azulon and Ozai, his sous-chef for twenty-nine of them; they both knew how these things worked.

They both knew he should have kept his spirits-damned mouth shut, but he'd worked thirty-one years without as much hope for his nation as he'd had these past two months.

The boy was too good for court. They'd known it when he was thirteen; it shouldn't have surprised them now.

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Lady Huian called the servant to her office. The servant considered not coming. But… it was Lady Huian. And she didn't know where else to go.

"Please take a seat."

The servant carefully smoothed her skirts under her knees, and did so. She did not look up.

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

She shook her head. Lady Huian reached across the low table, and squeezed her hand. "Let's find you someplace then, shall we?"

Crying was beneath a palace servant. But she wasn't a palace servant anymore, was she?

Five days ago, she'd been bold and thought herself clever when she was really just stupid, a fool who'd let her guard down. She had joked with His Maj—with Prince Zuko. Smiled and said *It's good to see you eating, Your Majesty.* And it was. And the young lord had blushed, and she hadn't been afraid at all that he would ever do anything more.

But she'd also called Prin—called *Fire Lord* Iroh's friend, the Water Tribe boy, a *poison taster.*

Jokes like that were not safe, and she could not risk staying to find out exactly how *not safe* they were, especially if anything *did* happen because then she would be the first blamed and the court sometimes found it *inconvenient* to investigate further—

"Ssh. Quiet now, you sweet girl. It won't be forever. We'll call you back when all is forgotten." Lady Huian stroked her hair. "You had a family emergency, and had to leave very suddenly…"

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Lightning flashed above the palace, cutting through the cloudless sky. The crack of thunder came a moment later. Some in the square glanced up; the rest had better things to do.

Or better things to gossip about. A group of old busybodies veterans, too old or injured or both to fight, was clogging up the pavement in front of Old Sakura's fish cart (*spicy fire-salmon, hot shell-lobster, fried to order—)*

"It's the *shoes.* Look, see? No, don't *look* -look, you're staring. But *see?* They changed their clothes, sure, but those are fancy little slippers they've got on. Palace servants, you mark me. Looks like Fire Lord Zuko's staff has got their first case of *urgently sick relatives."*

Old Sakura's useless fish gutter gutted his own hand. Again. "Boy. Stop staring and *work."*

"Sorry, ma'am." The young man ducked his head and tucked his shoulders, though he kept tracking the red-eyed girl with her too-nice shoes as an older woman led her towards the docks.

The busybodies continued busybodying. And not buying anything, either. "So His Majesty's finally cleaning court? About time he showed his colors."

"Do you think it's that? Or do you think the court cleaned *him?* Prince Iroh is back in town…"

One of them spit to the side. "Like anyone would stand for that traitor on the throne?"

"The boy's a traitor, too. What? He is. Though I guess he's probably rescinded that status by now. Perks of being in charge."

"How did he defeat his sister, anyway?"

"Poison, for sure. Slip her a little before the fight, and—"

"There wasn't a *fight.* They'd have announced it if he ascended legally. She was just Fire Lord one day, and gone the next."

"If you ask me, the Sages wanted the weaker heir on the throne. It's a power grab now that Ozai's gone."

"I heard she was betrayed by those Dai-whatsits—the Earth Kingdom traitors, you know the ones—"

" *Oww!"* the young man dropped his knife.

Old Sakura glared down at him. He didn't meet her eyes; never did. "You bleed on the merchandise, I'm taking it out of your wages."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, around the sliced finger he'd stuck in his mouth.

"Thought you said you knew how to do this."

"I do. In theory? I've *seen* it done."

Old Sakura sighed, and lamented the declining quality of day laborers. And busybodies who *were still standing in front of her stall.*

"—Clearly takes after his father. I mean really, trying to challenge for the throne at thirteen?"

"That's not what happened!"

"Oh, sorry, it was a *training accident."*

"You take that back! My cousin was in the 41st—"

"Never took you for a conspiracy theorist."

"Say that again."

"Break it up, you two, the guards are *right there—"*

Old Sakura's fish gutter stared down at his still-very-bleeding finger, then flicked his gaze briefly up at her. Old Sakura gave him the ol' *what do you expect me to do about it* deadpan that had gotten her through five children and seemed fit to get her through the grandbabies, too. The young man looked around helpless as a salmon-eel flopping on the docks, then finally figured out he could tear a strip from his shirt and wrap it up himself. Did it a lot better than anything he'd done with that knife, and Old Sakura wondered what kind of life taught a man about bandages but not blades. But she didn't become *Old* Sakura by asking questions this close to the palace.

The busybodies hadn't even glanced at Old Sakura's menu.

"My sister's girl is a clerk up at the palace, and *she* says the *guards* say the boy came after his father with swords on the eclipse. Swords!"

"I heard he used lightning."

"Com'on, how's the royal family's weakest bender pull off lightning during an *eclipse?"*

"You're all missing the point. Ozai is *still alive.* He's still our lord. Why isn't anyone getting him back? It's *got* to be a Fire Sage conspiracy—"

"The Fire Lord's the Fire Lord. Don't act like you care who's signing the war orders."

"Isn't His Majesty Zuko trying to stop the war?"

"Please stop buying into the propaganda. It's for the *other* countries, not us."

"I hope Prince Iroh *does* take the throne. We can't have a sixteen year old in charge, not when the other nations are getting bold enough to attack our *capital.* Definitely don't need a kid who's going to sit down for peace talks with the Avatar. Didn't he *lead* the attack? We need someone who knows war—"

"Someone who knows how to run from war, you mean?"

"Your cousin was in the 41st? *I* was in the 56th. Ba Sing Se was a bloodbath after we opened up that wall, he saved all our lives when he pulled back—"

"Should have slit his own stomach, the coward—"

" *Say that again."*

"Guys. The guards. Are *right there.*

Old Sakura's fish gutter swore, and stuck another finger in his mouth. It wasn't a Fire Nation swear, but at least it was quiet. Old Sakura flipped a tuna-pus on the grill. "You're going to get yourself burnt if you keep letting your mud show, kid."

He met her eyes. Just for a startled, scared moment. Green eyes in a Fire Nation face. "What do you mean, ma'am?"

"Colony brats don't last in Caldera. Especially not useless ones." She wasn't crude enough to say *half-breed,* but the way he always kept his eyes on the ground, she didn't need to. He ducked his head again. "And that's another thing—I don't know how it is in whatever backwater you washed in from, but in the Fire Nation, we have *pride.* Keep your head up, learn to use a spirits-damned knife if you can't bend, and *if you lot aren't buying anything, move out!"*

The busybodies took their near-brawl and their gossiping elsewhere. Old Sakura got back to selling fish.

Her fish gutter got back to practicing on himself. But he was swearing by Agni now, so he *could* learn.

%%%

The palace doctor ran a hand through his silvered hair as they stood outside the prince's room in the infirmary. Captain Izumi thought they'd both had less gray the last time they'd been here, but it was likely just her imagination. Three years wasn't much time to change, and they'd both been old lion-dogs for longer than she liked to admit.

"She didn't make it *worse,* at least," the doctor said. "But it's too soon to say if he's truly healed. The arrhythmia is gone for the moment, but it's always been better when he's resting. I simply don't know how a waterbenders' healing *works."*

"Keep me informed," she said. Not an order, but a request between friends. The doctor nodded tiredly.

One of her guards slipped from the Fire L—the prince's room. "Captain? He's awake."

She took one look at the man's face, and set her jaw. "Did he attack you?"

"No, he…" The guard looked ill. His next word was a plea, more than anything. "Captain."

The prince was kneeling on the floor when she entered the room. Kneeling, and offering his hands up to be bound, and looking puzzled by the way the other guard had retreated from him.

"Prince Zuko," she said, but didn't know how to continue.

"Captain Izumi," he said, his voice as carefully level and respectful as it had been since they brought him up from the dark. He probably thought it made him sound mature, but Izumi thought he sounded like a child drowning in his father's robes. "I'm ready."

She looked down at his offered hands, and wished she didn't understand. "Prince Zuko, please return to bed."

"I'd rather just sleep in my cell. It's… too bright here." He swallowed. "Or… am I banished?"

She couldn't talk. Not right then. Not with her prince on the floor. She took him by the arm (an inexcusable crossing of lines; a common guard handling the royal person like a son of Agni's line was a simple child in need of a friendly touch—) and she led him back to his bed. He leaned against the side at her urging, but he wouldn't lay down and her muscles locked at the thought of pushing him.

"You're not banished, Your Highness."

His eyes weren't entirely focused; the doctor had been *trying* to give him a few hours rest, but this particular son of Agni had the stubbornness of a mule-ox. "It's okay. You don't have to lie to me. I know how this works."

"Fire Lord Iroh has given no such orders, sir." She wanted to say that he wouldn't, that the prince was safe, but she'd thought him safe this morning and she wouldn't be made a liar again. "I believe he wishes for you to rest."

"You don't have to lie," he repeated, in the same dazed way a thirteen year old with bandages on his face had asked *How long am I banished for?*

And his uncle had sat by his bedside and explained, as Fire Lord Ozai's guards stood waiting to enforce the order.

Captain Izumi pushed the memory down. "I have no such orders, sir. I will report to you immediately if this changes."

He let his shoulders slump. It made him look even smaller. "Thank you, Captain."

His eyes flicked to the guard who'd backed away from him, and the other who was only now slipping back into the room.

"They're here to protect you, sir."

"By order of the Fire Lord," he said, sounding precisely as reassured as the statement warranted. One of those horrible laughs slipped out of him again, but at least he had the presence of mind to clap a hand over his mouth. His shoulders shook, and Captain Izumi didn't know whether she'd rather it was with laughter or worse.

He'd never trusted them to keep him safe, even when he was the one giving orders. He'd as good as said he'd expected to be overthrown at the court's earliest convenience. Given that he'd never shared that concern with *her,* she could gather what side of the coup he'd expected her to fall on. He'd thought she wouldn't help him.

She hadn't. What did it matter that Fire Lord Iroh had done things the legal way, that it had been no place of hers to step in when sun clashed against sun; she hadn't done a thing to stop him. Hadn't done a thing to earn this boy's trust, or a thing to keep it.

He'd been right about her. She just hadn't known it herself, until today.

"You should... rest for now. Sir."

"Okay," he said, but he was still sitting on the bed when she left. The doctor took one look at her, and prepared a second dose of sleeping aid for their former Fire Lord.

%%%

Sokka wished for a lot of things. There were the ones he quipped about, the little papercuts in life: more meat, an Avatar-leash, his space sword back from whatever burned Earth Kingdom field it had dropped in.

Then there were the wishes that cut a little too deep, and the scabs were prone to tearing: a hug that felt like mom's, his little sister at home sewing his pants like safe little sisters did instead of *constantly hurling themselves at danger,* a girlfriend that didn't turn into the moon or wind up otherwise gone-never-coming-back and it was already done before he'd even known he missed his chance to save her.

Then there were the big ones, the amputated limbs he still felt but couldn't move:

A childhood like the elders talked about, with summers split between the different camps where berries grew and salmon ran and seals slept on ice flows, *not* running between ice-

bound secondary sites to avoid Fire Navy patrols along the coast. Winters spent around a fire in the central lodge, wrapped in furs and stories of the world's first tides rather than staring at the spaces that hadn't been empty last year.

A working relationship with their sister tribe in the north and the Foggy Swamp and even the *knowledge* of where other pockets of waterbenders might be tucked away (and why hadn't he looked that up in Wan Shi Tong's library, instead of going straight for the information that would get them kicked out? He wondered if Aang felt the same about Air Nomad hiding places, but didn't-couldn't ask. It went without saying that getting chased by a giant owl-snake meant he'd screwed things up for their whole team.)

And a very relevant wish: for a father who'd stayed home, and the other fathers with him, and all the other tribes' fathers, so that Sokka could have had more than dim memories of how to act when different clans came together to trade. Because Sokka had been trying *really hard* to keep it together once the negotiations got serious, but he *didn't know how to talk to these people.* Just like he hadn't known how to talk in the Northern Water Tribe's court. Like he'd made of mess of things speaking with his father's troops before the invasion. And maybe these Fire Nation people would have always found some reason to take offense to a barbarian kid trying to talk sense into them, but at least Sokka might've had some idea of whether what he was doing was as rude as Zuko and his advisors acted. When he'd poked that report this morning and asked what it was, Fire Lord Anger Problems had looked ready to immolate him on the spot. It was a question! And an illustrative poke! He hadn't run over the guy's seal-kitten with his sled! The ministers scowled when he talked with his hands and glowered when he talked them through the other nations' views on things and just plain *glared* when he just plain *talked.*

He wished dad was here to deal with this instead, but dad was in one of their prisons (please, please be in prison; if no other wish of Sokka's ever came true let this be the one that did). He wished the Earth King wasn't an idiot who'd probably been eaten by his bear a dozen yards past Chameleon Bay, or that Long Feng could be trusted alone with an innocent civilian and a glowy light, or the Generals weren't holding their country together because each of them expected a piece of it at the end. He wished Arnook wasn't holed up in the North building a steel fleet and Kyoshi had any political pull of which to speak and Bumi wasn't *wolf-batshit crazy.* He wished there was *literally anyone else* who could have been handling these pre-negotiations that might open the door to some kind of *actual* peace, but 'willing' and 'capable' were alarmingly mutually exclusive at the national leadership level. Which, you know. Explained why a *band of literal children* had to end the war.

Essentially, Sokka wished adults didn't suck so hard. And if they could have gotten their act together about a century ago, that would have been great.

So yeah. He wished for a lot of things. But watching Iroh take down Zuko? Not on the wish-list.

He'd have *thought* it was; replacing Fire Lord Perma-Scowl with Fire Lord Gives-Great-Hugs? That sounded like a very practical and achievable Sokka-wish. So it had come with some Sokka-surprise when he'd been sitting at that table wondering how to even *start* explaining that *no one can own the oceans,* what even was that map of Zuko's, what did owning an ocean *mean* and why would you *want* to and if this was about fishing rights, that was cool and they could set some general harvest limits and this-is-our-ancestral-seasonal-hunting-spot-not-yours rules like any reasonable tribe, when suddenly Zuko was standing and shouting and flame-daggering and *when had Iroh decided to challenge his nephew for the throne, how was this a thing, goddamn it adults Sokka couldn't take you anywhere.* They should have turned Iroh down and just kidnapped some random firebending child to teach Aang; it had worked fine for the other elements.

And before he'd been able to figure out a non-maximally-insulting way of voicing any of that, it was already over. And Zuko—who sucked about as hard as the rest of them at this peace-talks thing but had been doing a *fantastic* job of shouting at his own advisors just as much as he shouted at them—was… was doing that crazy-laugh thing on the ground. And was no longer Fire Lord. Which Sokka would have thought he'd be okay with, but oh boy was he ever *not,* and he *did not want to think about why* but oh hey there went his brain anyway.

(Sokka's brain wondered why his side of the table couldn't have just walked out when Zuko told them to leave, and sent Toph back to drag him off to his own doctor. Zuko, like the suicidal moron he clearly was, had apparently decided he was okay with the World's Most Casually Abusive Twelve-Year-Old manhandling him. Sokka was not above taking advantage of that. Would have taken advantage of that. If he'd thought of it in time, dammit brain.)

(And Sokka's brain was really uncomfortable with how *convenient* it was for the White Lotus to have one of their grandmasters on the throne. Also on Sokka's growing list of discomforts: that the old dragon had been teaching him pai sho strategies, and some of them were coming to mind a little too readily. Like 'the best moves lead to victory on multiple fronts.' And 'never place a piece to win a round when there is the opportunity to take the game.' He wondered if Iroh had thought about any of that as he decided to escalate the situation rather than withdraw, or if playing to win was just years and years of instinct for him.)

(Sokka's heart trusted Iroh. But Sokka's brain had a feeling Zuko had trusted Iroh, too. And it would be nice, just once, to meet a Fire Nation royal and not feel like he was playing into their hands, however peace-loving and genial. Another item for the wish list.)

In conclusion, the Agni Kai had been two hours ago and Sokka's thoughts were primarily a long continuous scream of *not okay with this* on many levels that he had not yet even begun to process, and he was going to keep following Iroh around and not-asking-him-all-of-Sokka's-brain's-questions until his internal screaming had petered out some.

"Do we need to *leave?"* Sokka asked, sticking extremely close to the old dragon's side as Iroh sedately walked through the palace like he *hadn't* just overthrown its lord and *his nephew.* Which was, for the record, one of the things Sokka was not okay with. To a surprising extent he hadn't known prior to it happening. It was fundamentally unnerving to have the whole *family doesn't mean as much in the Fire Nation* thing thrown in his face from *Iroh,* when he'd been bracing for it from *Zuko.* It was kind of like cresting a snowbank and expecting the wind to blow at his front and getting his spear all braced, but nope, it was blowing from behind and now he was flat on his face and still not quite sure how he'd gotten there.

The servants and the guards weren't giving them the stink-eye as they passed. They were stepping out of the way and bowing low in a way they distinctly *hadn't* for Zuko. Which should have meant that they respected Iroh more, but Sokka had this twisting feeling in his stomach telling him it was the exact opposite.

"You should return to our rooms," Iroh said. "I assure you, this is quite normal for the palace. Things were… unusually rowdy under my nephew."

"Yeah. Because they liked him more, right? And they *don't* like us, right?" Crazy as it sounded, they'd seemed to find Zuko's inhuman persistence and occasional bouts of ineffectual yelling to be *endearing.*

Iroh didn't answer. He merely stopped in front of a door with his hands tucked up his sleeves, staring straight ahead as if expecting it to open itself. It *did,* because a servant ran over to get it for him. Which they'd also tried to do for Zuko, but Former Fire Lord Jerkface was *really good* at getting a head start and opening them himself. Which had been consistently funny to watch in a way that Sokka could almost respect, because it was really weird standing here and letting someone do *basic life things* for him.

Inside the door was some kind of really fancy gold-inlays-on-the-wooden-ceiling infirmary and Sokka realized suddenly why they were here and okay, maybe he should have gone back to the room after all, because Zuko's laughter was still echoing around his head and… it was not okay.

That silver-haired guard captain was talking with a guy who was clearly a doctor, in the same way Yagoda up at the North Pole had been. There was just a kind of *I know twenty ways to set bones and it goes the other way too so don't sass me young man* look they shared, even though this guy was tall and pale and stern-faced and Yagoda was short and dark and smiling. The guy stood as Iroh entered, and everyone in the room whose name wasn't 'Sokka' bowed absurdly low.

"How is my nephew?" Iroh asked. "Has he woken yet?"

"He's resting, sir," the guard captain said. Which was, Sokka noted, not an answer to either question.

"I see," Iroh said, holding her gaze. And she held his. And they had a high-stakes blinking-contest, while Sokka's brain tried not to wonder how many palace guards it would take to bring Iroh down. He hoped that wasn't what the captain was thinking, too. Eventually Iroh turned to the doctor, like he hadn't just failed to assert his eyeball dominance. "I wish to be informed when my nephew is ready for visitors."

"Yes, Fire Lord Iroh." The doctor bowed again. "If I may, would it be possible to speak with the waterbender? It would be helpful in formulating Prince Zuko's treatment plan if I knew what she has already done."

"I will request that she visit you. In the mean time, I require a sleep aid. Four doses, I think."

Sokka could actually *see* the guy biting back his curiosity. Apparently one did not ask the Fire Lord *why do you need that in the middle of the afternoon,* or *should I be concerned.* Which was unfortunate, because those were definitely Sokka's questions. He'd rather not be the one asking them and looking like the idiot who didn't know what his own side was planning. Another thing that wasn't okay: Iroh's communication skills. They'd *had* this talk,

the *please tell us your plans before we are in the middle of them* talk, but it had stuck about as well as the *please don't flick dirt in the vicinity of the food preparations* discussion had gone with Toph.

The doctor prepared the doses from a container he'd already had on his desk, which pretty much told Sokka the state Zuko was in. Though having seen the teen walk through a blizzard *after* fighting Katara *after* drenching himself in polar waters, Sokka had to wonder how many doses it had taken to put him down. There wasn't any unhinged laughter from behind that closed door, so probably Former Fire Lord Couldn't-Have-Given-Sokka-Better-Nightmares-If-He'd-Tried really was resting. Or curled up on his side wheeze-chuckling quietly because he'd finally run out of breath and only then did anyone dare to touch him.

How much more human do you want me to be, Water Tribe?

Sokka would have gladly gone his whole life without having a concrete answer to that. But he should have known that Zuko didn't *do* rhetorical questions.

Once Iroh had a little red packet of sleepy-time powder in his hands, he went to the door. And stared at it. The guard captain herself opened it for him, and Katara was right, these people bowed *too much.*

"I will require your assistance, Captain Izumi," Iroh said. Once the captain was done bowing and closing doors behind them and bowing again, she followed at their heels like a particularly stiff-tailed polar bear dog.

Lightning boomed, off in Azula-land. That had been… happening a lot today. Sokka stared up at the ceiling as they walked.

"What are we going to do about *that?"*

"I will handle it. Please, return to the others."

"Oh no. Oh no no no, you are *not* facing Crazy Blue alone. I know you don't want Aang with you in case you need to make with *solving* the problem, and Toph is acting *weird,* but Katara and I—"

"Water against lightning? Your sister's own element will conduct the cold fire to her heart."

"Okay, so just you and me—"

"Azula is a bending prodigy."

A part of Sokka's brain noted that Iroh always called her *Azula,* never *my niece.* The rest of him was finding newer, more alarming ways to be *not okay* with this. "I'm practically a swordmaster, if you round up—"

"Sokka. "

"I can help."

Iroh set a hand on his shoulder. All warm and familiar and comforting and *still not okay.* "Return to our rooms. I have tea to make."

For a second that statement joggled around Sokka's brain like a lose package on a sled, out of place and what even was it. Then his eyes focused on the little red packet, and it clicked home.

"Oh. *Oh.* Tea," he said. "Right. ...I could still help. Just in case."

"She is a firebender, Sokka."

And he wasn't. And judging by the reactions around the table this morning, firebenders would literally rather be dead than be non-benders. And sure Iroh was friends with Master Piandao, but Piandao was a legendary swordsman and the only non-bender Sokka had noticed in the White Lotus' ranks. So. Sokka and his growing competence with the stabbity-stab probably looked like bad backup, from where Iroh was standing. Maybe not even backup at all, just a Water Tribe boy holding a literal lightning rod.

He twisted all that bitterness around into a worried smile. "Be careful, Fire Lord. Team Avatar has some things they need you for, still."

Iroh smiled, and went with his guard captain to make tea for his niece. And Sokka went back to the Gaang's room. No one even tried to assassinate him on the way there, though some clerk-y looking people scuttled to the side of the hall and bowed *ridiculously low,* like he was… the friend of their new Fire Lord.

He was friends with the Fire Lord. That was going to take some getting used to.

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In the back of the kitchen, away from where the sous-chef was sorting out his staff following his sudden field promotion, the off-duty guards were talking. As quietly as they could, because the kitchen staff were gossips, and this… wasn't talk they wanted getting around. It was just talk they needed to get out in the open, so they knew they weren't alone.

"This is wrong. We all know it's wrong but we're just *sitting here—"*

"He lost the Agni Kai. Two Agni Kais, to two Fire Lords. Maybe Agni's trying to say something."

One of the cooks scuttled past with a tray, and shoved it in the oven. And waited there, inhaling and exhaling to fiddle with the fire's temperature. And, in general, fooling no one. The guards stayed silent until the cook gave up and left. Then they re-huddled.

"The Avatar cheated, you all saw it—Fire Lord Zuko didn't make a single flame."

"Wait, what? What's that got to do with the Avatar?"

"I was right outside the room. He admitted he can take away bending. Did it to Fire Lord Ozai, why not to his son?"

"No. ...What. *No.* And he…? To the Fire L—to Prince Zuko?"

"The Avatar didn't even touch him. It was probably one of the generals poisoning him; he's been looking like crap all week. Worse than usual, I mean."

"He's been looking like crap because he's barely *sleeping,* we've all seen the light through his door."

The cook scurried back, peering in the oven like *anything* would be done two minutes after being put in. The guards turned as one, and glared. This proved sufficient to earn them a sheepish shrug and another few minutes alone.

"I was *in* the room. He made flame-daggers right before Ir— *Fire Lord* Iroh challenged, strong as any I've seen. And he didn't eat or drink anything before the fight. It wasn't poison."

"But I'm telling you, the Avatar *didn't touch him."*

"Who knows if he needs to touch him!"

"If he doesn't even need to touch someone to take their bending away, how are *we* going to stop him? Not that we're going to, I'm not suggesting— Crap, do I need to visit sick relatives?"

"I didn't hear anything."

There were murmurs of agreement tablewide.

"...Someone needs to do something. It's not *right."*

More agreement. And no suggestions given voice. This was the Fire Lord's palace: for the last hundred years, mutterings had gone exactly nowhere. When Azulon ordered the dragons killed, when Ozai took the throne from under his grieving brother, when a thirteen-year-old had been burned and banished as an example of what place compassion had in the court.

Lightning cracked over the palace. Again. It was getting more insistent.

Captain Izumi beckoned them from the doorway. "I need ten of you."

Ten more were already outside. There were very few people who warranted twenty royal firebenders. Given that Iroh was watching the proceedings and Zuko was already down, that narrowed things down significantly.

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The water between her hands was too warm, like the rest of this country. Katara shaped it into a perfect sphere, a penguin-otter, a fish-urchin, and it was tepid and awful between her palms. She could have frozen it, but tepid and awful was how she felt.

Sokka shot through the half-open door that some servant was trying to open for him, and for just a moment she thought there was a fight, that they could win their way free and *leave.* But he just flopped on the floor cushions next to Aang and stared up at the ceiling and rubbed his temples.

"So Iroh's going to poison Azula," he said, like that was a normal conversation starter.

The water between her hands collapsed. She scowled, and coaxed it back up from the tatami mats. "He's *what?"*

"Not dead-poison, just sleepy-time poison. And I'm pretty sure they're keeping Zuko sedated." He pressed both hands over his eyes. "Is anyone else *not okay* with how that just went down?"

Toph growled something incoherent. She hadn't uncrossed her arms since they'd hauled Zuko off and not let her come with.

Aang had pretty much been hugging his legs since then. "...At least the Fire Nation is on our side, now."

"Yeah," Sokka said. "Until one of those advisors dead-poisons Iroh. ...Man, what are we even going to *eat."*

"Is that *really* the most important—" Toph started.

Aang scooted a little closer to Katara. "Is Zuko going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine, Aang," Katara snapped.

"He looked really—"

"It's *Zuko.* He won't die that easily."

Toph rounded on her. "We both felt that messed up thing his heart was doing, Sugar Queen —"

(Stuttering, stalling, trying too hard under her hands and not hard enough at all.)

"—I haven't felt that since—"

(Aang on the ship, those first few days of his coma, when she thought that just-one-more session would make everything okay again. She knew how to heal that, now. She was possibly the most skilled healer in the world when it came to lightning damage. And she'd used her knowledge on *Zuko.)*

"—And another thing! Why did you have to keep popping that stupid cork, you just about gave him a heart attack *every time.* Did you think that was *funny?"*

"What?" Katara raised her eyes from her water, and frowned. "I just… do that when I'm thinking." *When she was nervous,* she was absolutely not going to say. "I was doing it under the table. It's not like he *knew."*

"Don't even try it, Sugar Queen. He jumped so hard he *fell over* when you did it the first time."

"Yeah, when we were sitting right next to him, not a giant meeting table away! Not everyone has ears on their feet, Toph."

"How did you *not* see him flinching? What is *wrong* with your sighted-people eyes? He's just trying to do the best he can—"

"Yeah, well," Sokka said, "while I admit either tentative belief in his sincerity or *great admiration* for his ability to con us while keeping up the shouty hot-head act, the guy needs to—needed to— *take a nap and think things over,* not throw together proposals every time somebody said something. I didn't need fifteen pages on why every idea I've ever had or will have on trade deals and tariffs is *completely wrong.* ...The graphs were nice, though. Does he just have people whose job it is to sit around and draw those?"

Her fish-urchin was growing more spikes by the moment. By the heartbeat.

(Zuko, whose heart had felt exactly as weak and fragile as Aang's.)

"I keep telling you—" Toph was too loud, too close, and Katara *didn't want to hear it.*

She stood. And slammed the sliding door open so hard the guard stationed outside jumped.

"Where are you going?" Aang asked.

She didn't turn around. "To keep Appa company."

"I'll come—"

She slammed the door closed behind her.

"Probably a bad idea, Aang," her brother said, muffled only slightly through the paper screens.

Appa whuffed a greeting. Katara sank down against his side, leaning back against too-warm fur in the too-warm sun. She bent her too-warm water, and tried not to think about how thin Zuko had felt under her hands, or how Iroh had to hold him down so he wouldn't crawl away from her. How breakable-scared he'd felt under her hands.

(Or of the boy in the catacombs, whose heart had been scared-strong under her hand as she touched his face. What had *happened* to him?)

%%%

Huian did not startle as the door opened behind her. She simply set her cloak aside, like it was a perfectly normal thing to have been wearing on a warm autumn day.

It was one of her staff. Fortunately. "Lady Huian, you're back. Prin—Fire Lord Iroh, he's... requesting we bring lunch to Her Highness."

Huian did not freeze; it would never do for her staff to see her as anything but composed. A steady fire they could gather around, when they needed strength. "He is not going himself?"

Thunder rolled overhead. Again. As it had been for hours now, with no Zuko to calm Azula back down. Lady Huian's servants were not known for their skill in redirecting lightning. If she sent one in, they might very well die.

"No," the servant said. "He… he's gathering guards. I think we're the distraction."

It is the Fire Lord's duty to protect his people, a very old and unconscionably naive part of her whispered. A pretty lie she'd learned at her grandfather's feet, and set aside her first day working under Azulon, packed up and stowed away with the rest of her childhood.

(Where had Zuko learned it? Certainly not from *his* grandfather.)

"Tell him I'll be right there."

"Lady Huian?" her servant asked, not understanding at first. Huian moved to her closet, and picked out the very best of her serving clothes, to replace the street clothes she'd worn to the dock. There was no excuse for poor style. "Lady Huian, you— you can't go—"

"I can't ask any of you to go, either."

(When had she unboxed all these toys? Honor and duty and all the rest.)

"Lady Huian…"

"I'll handle it," she said, the lie confident in her smile. "Go."

(The stupid boy couldn't even put his robes on straight, couldn't even last to his third month as Fire Lord; she'd known before he was ever burned that his father would cast him aside. Had distanced herself appropriately.)

(And then he had come back, the burn as horrid as she'd heard and his manners worse than she remembered, and all his pretty ideas on what a Fire Lord should be scattered about where anyone could step on them. Or trip over them.)

Lady Huian had adjusted a fidgeting boy's robes this morning and sent him into a fight this afternoon. She was no bender, but she thought she knew what an inner flame felt like.

%%%

Zuzu was late Zuzu wasn't coming Zuzu feared her hated her despised her scorned her *ignored her* had *given up on her—*

The palace outside her burned window frames was as quiet as it had ever been under Ozai. Quiet and respectful as the Fire Lord's court should be. Not that undignified riot of smiles and chatter the servants had gotten away with under Zuko's lax rule. The servants scurried and scampered and *left her* when she called out to them, the only time she would call out to them, she didn't need them didn't want them she just (wanted) (needed)—

Azula threw herself down on her nest of singed pillows, and resolved to punish her brother severely when he did dare to show his face. He knew the consequences of disrespecting his

Fire Lord.

(It had been hours.)

(It had been hours, hadn't it?)

A servant called out quietly. Azula ran fingers through her hair and seated herself prettily—though not so prettily as to give the impression she *cared* —and bid the woman enter.

It was an older woman. One of those head servant types, a concept she had always found amusing: a head rabbit-mouse, scurrying about a dragon's warren like they owned the dirt and scraps of bone. She bowed well enough, though, and Azula eventually allowed her to rise.

"Where is my brother?"

"The Fire Lord has been very busy today," The woman laid out her lunch with quick efficiency and steady hands and Azula contemplated whether she preferred that or trembling. She snatched the tea cup straight from the woman, just to watch her flinch, but she *didn't.*

Perhaps there was something to this head rabbit-mouse business after all. She drank, long and slow, savoring the moment before the woman realized her mistake.

She was too stupid to, of course. Azula really must do everything herself.

"You said 'the Fire Lord.' Am *I* not your Fire Lord?"

The woman took in a breath—a shaky breath, good, finally—and had the audacity to raise her head and meet her betters' gaze.

"Fire Lord *Iroh* has been very busy today," the rabbit-mouse said.

Her cup broke itself on the ground, tea drops and porcelain shards scattering over floor and servant and Azula like they were all equal. The woman was sitting there in perfect seiza with her hands steady on her lap and her chin high and her gaze still on Azula's, watching her, seeing her, *expecting something* from her and she knew she knew it wasn't for herself that this thing was asked, the rabbit-mice all scurried away from her feet but Zuzu had always been appallingly tolerant of them, they *liked* him, they *wanted to help* him— (They wanted to help *him.)*

(She hadn't heard fire. If there'd been a fight for the throne, why hadn't she heard *fire?)*

(Unless he hadn't fought.)

(The rabbit-mouse held her eyes, and there was *fight* in them.)

"Twenty-one guards in the hall," the servant whispered. "And your uncle. Fire Lord Zuko is in the infirmary. He isn't injured but they have him drugged, and the Avatar may have taken his bending away—"

Azula listened. And when the woman who was a lion-ferret, how had Azula ever mistaken her for a *mouse,* when she was done, Azula nodded her head in an appropriate show of gratitude and not a hair more.

"I strongly suggest," she said, "that you go out the window."

The servant looked uncertain for the first time since she came into the room.

"I never did like that door," Azula clarified, blue fire on her hands.

The servant's eyes went wide. Azula gave her a very generous ten second head start. Then she breathed in, and out, and in, and did what she'd been wanting to do for the past two months (for the past fourteen years).

She started burning this palace to the ground.

%%%

Sokka and Toph and Aang all stared in the same direction. It had been a very *loud* direction. And... continued to be.

"Uh," Sokka said.

" *Azula,"* Toph said, which was about as helpful, and significantly more obvious.

Aang did his Aang thing, and raced off in a swirl of wind without waiting for the rest of them.

An Avatar-leash. Sokka wished for one.

%%%

Azula punched fire at her uncle's face and felt better for the first time in weeks. She would laugh, but cackling mid-fight was a rookie mistake that interfered terribly with breath control, she'd learned that when she was seven and Zuzu had won against her for the very last time. She smiled instead, vicious white sharp-toothed, and trusted her flames to carry her emotions.

Uncle went on the defensive, and his guards took the offensive while he shielded them, and twenty-odd people could not fight effectively in a hallway. Azula kindly took down the walls for them, and leapt-rolled-smiled out of the way of the falling ceiling into one of the palace's

many courtyards. A few less than twenty-one guards stumbled out of the burning wreckage to chase her. And uncle. He wasn't smiling at all, the big Frowny-Face. Aww, was he having a *bad day?*

His hands moved in a swift circle, faster than she ever could (yet), and lightning crackled her way.

Azula caught it, and redirected, and wondered why he'd ever thought that would *work.* Zuzu had been demonstrating the redirection form for *ages.*

Uncle caught the bolt. And redirected. And by the intense look on his face, he apparently saw nothing funny in playing lightning tag with his niece. Was this the first time he'd ever played with her? Hmm.

Bored now. Azula redirected the lightning into the chest of a handy guard, and trusted that Uncle would learn his lesson. No more of that, please.

She moved her own arms in a circle, and watched him brace for another redirect. Instead she called flame whips, and smiled ever-so-wide as he was forced to dodge, off-step and off-balance.

(He was fighting at full strength, not tired at all. Not like he would have been if he'd *really* fought earlier. Had Zuzu sunk to his knees? Had he begged?)

Azula dyed the courtyard blue. She was a daughter of Agni, her light closer and hotter than her ancestor's.

Uncle's guards kept getting in the way of her perfect kill shots. Oh well; at least they weren't wasted.

Uncle let them. Zuzu wouldn't have.

(Zuko was so trusting, just like those turtleducks he loved, willing to swim up to the first hand that showed kindness but those were exactly the hands that were close enough to hurt.)

"I must admit," Azula panted, into one of those little lulls that fights have, when one was holding a guard by the throat and one's uncle was hesitating adorably. "I'm impressed. Playing the long game, were you uncle?" That flicker in his eyes, yes, she was *right.* (She was right she was right she was always right, she should never have hidden away, this wouldn't have *happened* if she'd been on the throne.) "You knew you couldn't beat father, but you *trained* Zuko. Poorly, I might add. You took him from father and from me and you played the caring uncle. Set up the child-Avatar to take out our father for you. Set up Zuko to take his place. And then you *broke* him, just because you could. Because he's father's and you made him yours, and you didn't need him anymore. One last backhand to your brother. I can understand that."

The guard whimpered and clawed at her hand and it was really all quite undignified. Azula let the heat crawling under her skin bite and gnaw its way free, hotter and hotter and what *would* Uncle do, there were so many people around, would he still pretend like he cared about them?

"But Uncle. Zuzu is *my* brother. My toy. You do not. Get to break. My toys."

Uncle threw lightning again. A fair move, given that it took two hands to redirect, and one of hers was otherwise occupied. She jerked the guard into its path, and tsked.

"Rude. Now, what was I saying?" Toys, something something. Oh well.

She brought fire to her legs and boosted her speed to close the distance. The fat old dragon was better at range than in close quarters.

Should be better at range than in close quarters.

She should be better, but she missed a step there, and another, and—

And Uncle was waving the guards away, now. Didn't need them, now. Was smiling, now. Just a little curling at the edges of his lips, and had it always been there or was she imagining things—

(Was this really happening or was she imagining it?)

(Where was Zuzu?)

"Did you enjoy your tea, Azula?" the vindictive bastard asked, just before the world went dark.

He assisted somewhat in hastening it along, and the last thing she saw was stupid nonsense her brain threw up, of the Avatar suddenly appearing and a no-name guard stepping between her and the child and her uncle like rabbit-mice could *defend* dragons—

%%%

"Captain Izumi," Fire Lord Iroh said, the first he had spoken since this fight began. "Please step aside."

"I won't let you take her bending." Decades of loyal service compelled her to add, "Sir."

The Avatar clutched some kind of staff to his chest, and stared up at her with wide eyes. "I… I wasn't going to. I just wanted to help."

"Captain Izumi," the Fire Lord said. "We will not harm her. Stand down."

She lowered her gaze, and stepped to the side, and wondered when following her lord's orders had started to feel like treason. He caught her arm. Squeezed, gently. Spoke gently. His

eyes were anything but.

"Can I expect your support, Captain? Or must you *visit sick relatives?"*

"...I serve the Fire Lord," she said.

"Which one?" The princess on the ground giggled, and then laughed. She looked far too much like her brother as they forced another cup of tea down her throat and took her to the infirmary. Her guards went along, not as escorts but as patients. Far too few of her guards.

Iroh still gripped her arm. She was not sure she could pull free, even if she'd had the spirit to. "Now, Captain Izumi. You will tell me exactly what happened to my nephew this summer."

%%%

Another one of those not-so-disguised servants went hurrying past, expensive shoes flashing under the hem of her modest robe. The same one who'd been dragging a crying girl in her wake earlier, Shenji thought. And cursed. Because *Agni-damned knife* and *fish with their dead beady eyes* and he just wanted to go *home.*

"Boy," the fish cart owner scolded him. Just that. She'd run out of words for him, and now just… had a *tone.*

"Sorry, ma'am." He stuck his finger in his mouth, and tasted dirt and copper, fish slime and grill smoke, a hint of spices he'd started to like and he *hated* that.

He was trying to decide whether to bandage it up—and how many more bandages his poor shirt could *make* —when the guards marched into the square, and a royal herald with them. They made an understated production of posting the announcement up. An equally understated one of reading it. But then, they didn't need to do much when the crowd had gone grave-silent the moment they'd appeared.

When the lightning that had flashed over the palace all afternoon had been replaced with thick curls of smoke.

"On this day, Zuko, son of Ursa and Ozai, stood before Agni and was found wanting; His hand and His blessing have moved to Fire Lord Iroh, son of Ilah and Azulon—"

Shenji set down the knife. Just… set it down, away from his shaking hands.

"Sick relatives, boy?" Old Sakura asked him. Quiet and low, barely moving her mouth, barely glancing at him.

He didn't know whether to nod or not, to run or not. But he met her gaze—dangerous, stop, he couldn't *do* that, look back at the ground quick quick—and whatever was on his face in that instant was answer enough.

She paid him full wages for the day, which he hadn't expected. Even if he'd worked the whole day, he hadn't expected it; so many of the shops and ships and stalls short-changed day laborers. And she wrapped up a hot fresh-cooked fish for him, and didn't make any big show of it. Just shooed him away when he choked on his thanks.

Shenji bowed low, not sure if it was too low, his hands awkwardly sculpting the Fire Nation flame. And then he left, as swiftly as any palace servant. Which was so absurdly close to the truth he almost wanted to cry.

Iroh was Fire Lord.

Iroh, who by all accounts *really liked* his nephew, and Shenji didn't know where today's announcement fit into that, but he had to get back to his master and let them all know, let them deal with this, find a way to keep them all safe. He was just an *apprentice,* he'd never signed up for this.

(Iroh's nephew, Zuko, who they'd kept locked up in a place that made Lake Logai look like it really *was* a vacation retreat.)

(Zuko, who'd extended a blanket pardon to any banished servants, Earth Kingdom ones included, but how stupid did he think they were?)

(Shenji had been debating *being* that stupid. Just… just to check. And if he got locked up or burned alive then at least everyone else would *know,* and it would be over and it wasn't like any of them could go home again they *had* to make this work—)

But Azula hadn't lasted a day on the throne, and Zuko had only lasted two months, and Iroh had fought them under Ba Sing Se before they'd even been half the traitors they were now. The new Fire Lord was so far on the Avatar's side it was amazing his fire hadn't turned to air.

The Dai Li. Continued to be fucked.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Credits! Mostly from FF, they had a whole week to respond to chapter 14 and boy did they ever.

Some of these things were going into the story already and some of them weren't, but I'm gonna go ahead and credit them equally because A) you all are fantastic, and B) then you have no idea which are longer plot threads, mwahaha.

Jade: wanted to see multiple outsider POVs. This took for freaking ever to write, it was all your fault. (Iloveyou.)

Breakfast: whose love of the clerks and their too-pure interactions with Zuko made me grin and start this off by ruining their day

Yue: how the servants felt about kid!Zuko and his banishment

weareagentsofnothing (posted at captainkirkk's tumblr, which is pretty much my go-to Jet-stalking place to watch peoples reactions, they are my Fairy Godkirkk): the 41st families still supporting Zuko. Because heck yeah they are. Though I imagine Ozai did his best to suppress the real story; Zuko's crew certainly seemed in the dark about his Agni Kai.

Elf Kid2.0: Sokka, on the topic of "great, the Fire Nation thinks non-bending is literally worse than death"

Spider and the Fly: Got a whole damn scene, Imma just quote their genius: 'p.s. i've got a mental picture of zuko waking up and holding his wrists together for the guards, handcuff-me-style, ready for delivery to his cell/ship/doom, and them being like "uh no you were great we're actually here for your safety?" and him, like, laughing them off like "haha, very funny joke, now hurry up and cuff me, i want my naps"'

Breakfast: suspicions that the White Lotus wanted Iroh to take over, and this may have been the plan all along

Caryolyn (and I-Tripped, and Sephiroth Cresent-Valentine, and many of you, but I stopped writing names down after awhile sorry): desired sweet sweet Azula fallout

donahermurphy: who specified that that sweet sweet Azula fallout include paranoia for poor trusting Zuko and Iroh doing this all as a long con. Honestly, in that family, a long con would make more sense than actual uncle-nephew love. Can't blame her… Quote: "she's going to think Iroh has been playing a long game. all this time. what's better for the brother who stole his throne than tempting his son into betrayal and then, at the last moment, killing the son anyway. Just to prove that the point was to mess with Ozai's toys."

Soirreb: "I'm also looking forward to seeing how Iroh will handle Azula. If she's been paying attention, she'll know how to redirect lightning, so that ought to give the old man a surprise." Boy did it ever!

AvacadoLove: The servants. Are not happy. (And microaggressions going forward are a go, please enjoy.)

XandyNZ: "He's already lost 2 Agni Kais against 2 different Fire Lords, plus his firebending is so weak it has to be a sign that Agni is saying a clear DO NOT WANT."

Flip Ants: people thinking Zuko's been poisoned, and/or the Avatar stole his firebending. (Sadly, I did not find a good place for this idea, which I loved and tried to write but couldn't quite make work: "I'd love to get a scene where various advisors work out that none of THEM had been poisoning the Fire Lord.")

Chapter 16: Conversations to the Side of Midnight

Chapter Notes

> Well now that you are all fully recovered from the last two chapters, please enjoy some sibling bonding! Just what so many of you asked for.
>
> I'm starting see what genies get out of granting wishes.
>
> PS: We are now back to normal-sized chapters, remind me to never do 10k for one update again. I regret nothing and everything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zuko had talked them into giving him a different room. It was still in the infirmary, but… not in the suite meant for royalty, not the part with dizzyingly large amounts of space around the bed, space that wasn't there for any reason except to make him feel small and windows so large he wouldn't have even had to duck to jump through them and just *leave* except they'd kept two guards inside with him the whole time watching to make sure he didn't. His new room was better. It was in some kind of isolation ward, for plagues or prisoners. Small enough he could reach out and touch the walls from his bed, and no windows, so the guards could stay outside. And there was a door, with a cold draft under it when he pressed his hand to the floor just to check. That was luxury enough.

They'd left him a candle, and a small stack of unlit ones. He… didn't know why. A joke, maybe? It should be after dark by now, probably a *lot* after dark, so he didn't need it. He should just blow it out, but instead he'd been diligently lighting a new one each time the flame on the last started to gutter. He'd been in this room for three candles. He didn't know how long that was compared to anything else, but it was *a* measurement.

Keeping track of time was a luxury, too. Uncle was already a better jailer than Ozai.

Zuko shoved his hand over his mouth, and *did not laugh.* It didn't work. He tried to regulate his breathing, to count to five on each inhale and exhale, he even stared at the little candle flame and pretended its flickerings were caused by him, but it didn't work. He even *held his breath,* but he was still—

Zuko kept holding his breath until it burned, but he could still hear the laughing.

That… wasn't him.

He glanced at his door, and the guards he *knew* were right out there. But it wasn't coming from their direction, and it wasn't the kind of laugh a free person would make. He slid off the bed, his bare feet touching cold tiles (easier to scrub clean than tatami, easier to disinfect once he was gone), and pressed his good ear to the wall. He walked slowly, and listened, and slid down to a crouch in the far corner of his room. It was loudest here.

"Hello?" he whispered, and the laughing stopped.

"You don't sound like mother," a voice accused.

"...Azula?"

"Zuzu, get *out of my head.* It's too crowded, and I don't need your stupid."

She sounded… really offended. And really, really drugged. He knew that feeling, where the world spun slowly around his head and everything was too largesmall, too slowfast, and he had to fight not to sleep because that was what they *wanted* and nothing good ever came from doing what others wanted of him. (He'd refused a cup of tea… awhile ago. Asked the doctor if he could just try to sleep on his own, please, he didn't want it didn't need it he was calm now. The man hadn't called in the guards to force him to drink it like back in the room with the too-big windows after Captain Izumi and Uncle's voice had left. He'd just left it on the bedside table, next to the candle.) (The doctor also hadn't left any water in the room, and Zuko didn't know whether he was supposed to just ask the guards when he got thirsty or if this was how they were going to make him drink it anyway. He'd been a lot thirstier than this for a lot longer, so there wasn't any reason to find out.)

"I'm not in your head," Zuko said. "I'm on the other side of the wall."

"Hmm. Prove it."

Zuko cast a glance at his own shut door, then knocked quietly on the wood.

There was a pause, and then she knocked back.

"....So. You're out of your wing."

"Uncle escorted me," she said breezily. "He's very considerate, our uncle."

Zuko clapped a hand over his mouth, and *knew* he was the one laughing this time.

"Quite," Azula agreed. "So. On your knees, or out fighting?"

It took him a moment to remember what she was talking about. It… felt like it was awhile ago, in some distant past he didn't think about anymore. "Fighting."

"Good."

He didn't have to ask about her. Fighting, of course. "...How many people did you kill?"

"Do you *really* think I can count that high while the room is full of birds, Zuzu?"

...She was really, *really* drugged. Probably with something different than him, because sleep aids didn't cause hallucinations. "Um. They do get pretty loud."

"Their chirping is insufferable. Flitting and crowding and saying such nonsense, if they don't want us then what do they *want from us."*

"I'll let you know when I figure it out," Zuko said, and he wasn't sure they were talking about birds anymore.

It was quiet for awhile. He settled down more comfortably. Wondered if he should grab the blanket off his bed (but then he might miss something she said). Wondered if she had any water in her room, or just a cup of tea on her bedside table.

"Is father dead?" she asked. Suddenly, maybe lucidly, but still slurred-slow.

"No."

"That was stupid of them."

He didn't tell her about Ozai's bending. It… probably wouldn't help her. "The Avatar is a pacifist," he said instead.

"Also stupid. If they'd killed the airbender off, in a few years they could have had a Water Tribe savage, shouting and waving an ice spear. Much more practical."

"I don't think the other nations think about tactically killing the Avatar. Usually."

"Must I keep repeating myself, Zuzu?" By which she meant, *they're stupid.*

Would father have been proud of him, if he'd killed the Avatar enough times to bring the cycle back to Fire?

...Would he ever stop having thoughts that started with 'would father have been proud of him if'?

"Probably not," Azula said. "Mother left us *ages* ago and she certainly never shuts up."

He'd been talking out loud. Or she'd been hallucinating that he'd been. There wasn't a functional difference, in this little room with its flickering candle.

"I'm not sorry I did it," he said. "I hate father. I hate him so much. Why didn't grandfather protect us from him? The whole court had to have known what he was like, he didn't *hide* it —"

"Uncle never cared, you know," she said, which meant that either she was hearing a totally different conversation, or hearing this one exactly right. "He was playing you to get to father. He admitted it during our fight."

"Stop *lying.* He… he loves me. He said I'm like his son."

"Zuzu, he put his son in active battle like some expendable foot soldier, instead of ten miles back in a command tent. Being *like his son* is hardly a compliment. ...That laugh is *appalling,* stop it at once."

Zuko drew his knees up and pressed his face into the pants they'd given him. Silk for the former Fire Lord. It was as much a joke as candles for a former firebender. "Sorry, Azula."

"For Agni's sake, stop *apologizing.* If you want to laugh hysterically, laugh hysterically. You're a prince of the blood, no one has the right to shut you up."

"Except my little sister?"

"Of course. *Stop laughing."*

"Sorr—"

"Stop apologizing!"

He laughed into his knees, and it… felt like a real laugh, that time.

"I don't know *why* the rabbit-mice all run to you," Azula groused. Which… probably meant something to her. "I'm better, anyone can see."

"You are," he agreed. "But I keep bread in my pockets."

She hmmed, as if seriously considering this statement. "So feeding the turtleducks has been a cover, all along? Devious," she finally replied, with a hint of respect.

...Zuko realized he might still be a little drugged, too. Just a little. And thirsty. "Ozai never got fooled by the bread."

"No, father is far more carnivorous. He eats them down to the bones, even their children. You were too much mother's; he didn't recognize you as his."

Zuko wasn't laughing anymore. But he kept his head down on his knees, and just… breathed. "I was his, though. I… I always was."

"You're right," Azula said, which was the closest he'd ever heard her come to saying *I'm wrong.* "Zuzu, you are the most wasted resource in the Fire Nation."

So now he was a natural resource, not a chewed-up puppy-cub. "I… what?"

"Father burned half your face off and you were *still* loyal. He should have put you in the Home Guard, or given you a division to command somewhere far enough away that you wouldn't leak honor on the palace floors." She sniffed. He could imagine her raised chin, her imperious gaze at her own shadow-dark wall. "If he'd done that to me, I'd have killed him a year later."

Zuko laughed once, startled. "A year?"

"On the anniversary, of course. Long enough that he wouldn't suspect, clever enough that no one could prove it, but everyone would *know."*

"Why didn't I think of that," Zuko said, a little sardonically.

"Because you're a Dum-Dum who shoved his pockets full of breadcrumbs, like the rabbit-mice *matter.* They couldn't save you, Zuzu. This time or last time or ever. The lion-ferret roared but the dragon couldn't help; the nets had already tangled her wings even though she didn't see until she tried to fly."

"...That's rough," Zuko settled on, because he had to say something. She'd been really *impassioned.*

"Loyalty is the scarcest commodity in court," she continued, perfectly lucid and perfectly reasonable, as if that last speech hadn't happened. "...I wouldn't have killed you. When I reclaimed my crown."

"That's… nice?" Less nice that she'd been actively thinking about it, but nice she'd decided on not killing him. He'd… been wondering. "I wouldn't have killed you, either."

"I know that, Dum-Dum."

"How?"

"You were *already* Fire Lord."

He wasn't sure that keeping the crown warm for a few weeks really counted, but he wasn't going to argue with a drugged fourteen year old. "So were you," he said instead.

"Congratulations," she drolled, "neither of us are as fratricidal as father and uncle."

He was laughing again. Great. "Thanks, Lala."

"If you speak that name where anyone else can hear, I will rescind my moratorium on fratricide."

Zuko smirked. "I think that's what makes you Lala."

"...Dum-Dum."

She hadn't actually said not to call her that. Just not while anyone else was around. "Lala," he said again, the smirk in his voice.

"I *will* hurt you," she said. "I won't kill you, but I will hurt you." But she didn't light the wall between them on fire. Which might have been the drugs, but so far as he could hear, she didn't even try. "...It's difficult to picture you dead, Zuzu. That's not a privilege I can extend to most people."

"Thanks," he said, and wished he was from a family where he wasn't sincere about that. A family where she'd been joking in the first place.

They kept talking. For hours or maybe days as the candle flickered on the table, lasting longer than it should. They talked like they hadn't talked since he was seven and having nightmares (and she was five, and stuck a foot out to trip him in the hall as he went crying to

mother, and the guards found them in the morning curled up in one of the secret passageways, still in the pillow fort they'd built while playing Earth Kingdom Assassins.)

(He'd always been the one assassinated. She had been very insistent about that, so that she could avenge his death with fire and cackling and the casual destruction of each of his toy soldiers in turn as they served as elite earthbenders only *disguised* as Fire infantry. And she always promised it would be his turn to avenge her next, but it never was.)

He didn't know when he fell asleep. He woke to a gentle knock on the door, and a servant easing inside the room.

"Your Highness?" the man's eyes went to the bed, first. He looked incredibly alarmed to find it empty. Even more so, to find Zuko groggily huddled in a corner. "...Please come with me, Your Highness. We'll get you dressed. The Fire Lord wishes to speak with you."

Zuko glanced back at the wall. Wondered if he should say goodbye, or let her know where he was going. His persistent stare at a blank wall only put the servant more on edge. Zuko knocked twice, lightly, and stood up. He felt like walking should be hard—his legs shaky or weak or *something* —but he actually felt better than he had in… probably since Ozai had thrown lightning at him, and he'd redirected for the first time in his life, then run half-way across the city with the aftereffects still burning in his chest. The waterbender knew what she was doing, apparently. (She would have *had* to, to save the Avatar after Ba Sing Se.)

He followed the servant steadily, out the door and past his two guards, and tried to seem completely casual when he glanced at the room next to his.

It was open. And empty.

"Your Highness?" the servant asked.

Zuko didn't feel like laughing. He just felt cold again. He could… ask. If Azula had really been there, if they'd moved her before he'd woken up. He could see windows again; the sun was higher than he'd thought. Closer to noon than sunrise. Uncle probably would have

wanted her moved to an institution as soon as possible; if he'd wanted her staying in the palace he would have left her *alone,* she wasn't hurting anyone.

He could ask. But if they said *no,* he…

He didn't ask.

Zuko followed the servant. People opened doors for him and bowed to him, bathed him and dressed him, firebent his hair dry with warm hands because they knew he couldn't do it himself, everyone knew now.

The woman who always fussed over his robes wasn't there. When he asked, they told him she had to leave the palace. Sick relatives.

"I hope they get better soon," Zuko said. The warm hands paused in his hair, then finished tying off his topknot with clinical efficiency. It felt lighter, without the crown.

"...The Fire Lord is waiting, Your Highness," the servant said, and didn't meet his gaze a single time as they walked through the halls.

Everyone was very respectful as they passed, just like they'd been when Ozai and Azulon ruled. A real Fire Lord was back on the throne.

Zuko kept his head down, and followed where he was led.

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: Most of the dialogue in this chapter was written back when I posted chapter eleven (AKA the start of the Trust Countdown). The Agni Kai with Uncle + this post-breakdown sibling bonding whispered through a wall were the seed images that started

this whole fic. And we're almost done with the prologue, wee! I cannot wait to hit the main story, you don't even know.

Chapter 17: Turtleducks Don't Care

Chapter Notes

> Re Zuko's ship name: I've switched from the fanon "Wani" ("The Alligator") to "Wanyi" ("The Perchance"), because it's so very fitting for Zuko's quest. Suggested by Tuktuk in their podfic of Salvage. Their explanation: "Wànyī (萬一): Literally 'one in ten thousand,' 'perchance.' Used grammatically in Chinese to mean 'what if' or 'just in case.' I think a ship called 'The Perchance' is perfect for a boy clinging to false hope."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was one of those sunny semi-formal tea rooms no one but Uncle really used. Uncle ordered everyone else from the room, servants and guards alike. They hesitated a moment, and the guard closest to Zuko glanced towards him (which was funny, a little. What did they think he was going to *do,* attack the Dragon of the West with his bare hands?) They left a little too slowly, but with less backtalk than they'd have given Zuko if he'd tried giving the same order.

...He wasn't Fire Lord anymore. Uncle was. Zuko needed to... to *bow* or something, but before his mind could catch up with the thought and make him *move,* before *this is your Fire Lord* could override *this is Uncle,* before any of that, Uncle bowed first. Brushed his robes flat and lowered himself to the floor, to his knees, his forehead touching the tatami and now Zuko *knew* he was going insane because this was the *Fire Lord* (this was *Uncle)—*

"What I have done to you cannot be forgiven," Uncle said, "to ask would be an insult. But I am sorry, Zuko, so sorry—"

Uncle's topknot wasn't as perfect as Zuko's, a part of his mind, a *stupid* part of his mind, noticed. Either he'd done it himself or it had been a long time since a servant retouched it.

"—Miss Toph had warned us of your… condition, the damage Azula did to you. I could not stand by, but I should have found another way—"

Uncles robes fit perfectly in a way Zuko's never had, always too loose on his frame no matter how much the tailors chased him for fittings, but there was a place on Uncle's back where the belt had flipped over itself in a way that a servant would have reached over and just *fixed* on Zuko.

"—Captain Izumi has informed me of what Ozai—"

His head spun and he knew he'd been missing words and if this kept up any longer, he might start losing *time* again, and he hated that hated that and he wanted to be angry so bad but it wasn't *safe* to be angry, this was his *Fire Lord,* and Zuko guaranteed that Captain Izumi hadn't told him the whole story because the only ones who'd been in that room had been him and Ozai. She'd know what happened at the prison and whatever Ozai *said* happened in the throne room, but Zuko hadn't told anyone.

"—hate me for as long as you need to, nephew. It is your—"

"Please. Stop doing that. Just… just stand."

Uncle didn't. But at least he sat up. And… Zuko sat, too. He needed to. He managed to do it smoothly, even, so it didn't look so much like falling.

"Can I… would questions be too impertinent, Fire Lord Iroh?"

Uncle flinched, but nodded his permission.

"Where is my sister?" he asked, hands flat on his knees and back as straight and breathing as steady as he could make them. Because if the world was going insane today he needed to know how insane *he* was.

"I have moved her to an institution in Amigara. They… specialize in cases like hers. She will be safe there while they treat her, and you will be safe from her. She will not hurt you anymore, nephew."

He said that like he thought it was Zuko's main concern. Amigara. That was… on the outskirts of Caldera, outside of the crater. A rural town. Not nice enough for the nobles to vacation in, but apparently good enough to hide away their undesirable relatives.

He swallowed, and asked the question that had gone unanswered since last night. "How many guards did she kill?"

Uncle looked slightly taken aback, like he had not expected that question, or not expected Zuko to know enough of the situation to *ask* that question. "Four. The others will recover; Miss Katara was able to help them in time. She is quite adept with injuries caused by fire, and quite possibly the only waterbending healer with such experience with lightning. We are fortunate to have her."

By which he meant *Zuko* was fortunate. Zuko let out a slow breath, trying to get the anger out before it even got started. It was nothing but hot ash in his throat, anyway.

"Who?"

Uncle knew the names, at least. He recited them with the same solemnity that Zuko received them. They were… faces. People he'd seen in the hall or yelled at for being impertinent, who'd protected him until it was their duty to protect Iroh instead, who'd deserved to serve a royal family that wasn't tearing itself apart. There'd probably been a time when the Royal Guard could be loyal to the *entire* royal family without contradiction, instead of just the Fire Lord. It… would have been nice to have been born however many centuries ago *that* was.

It would have been nice if Uncle understood the first thing about his niece. Azula… as much as she threatened, he'd couldn't picture her killing for *fun,* only for a purpose. It wasn't a morality issue. He wouldn't kid himself that it was, especially when those were four of *their* people she'd murdered. But her perfectionism abhorred waste; wasted energy, wasted actions, wasted lives that could have been grovelling in their rightful place at her feet instead of cluttering up her floor. Ba Sing Se had been the most bloodless victory of the war, even if the lack of casualties had probably made it easier for the Earth Kingdom and Uncle's group to take back in the end. ...Which was an observation he was never going to share with her.

She must have felt *really* cornered by Uncle, or had something important he'd gotten in the way of her doing. Otherwise she'd have just gone around the guards, danced them in circles to prove not just that she was *superior* but that she was so far beyond them as to be *untouchable.* Uncle didn't get that. He'd… never really *tried* to get Azula.

Uncle was waiting for him, patient as he had always been. The only thing missing was a tea cup in his hand. A conversation was *serious* when Uncle forwent tea.

Zuko held his breath until he was sure the laughter wouldn't come, then let the air out slowly.

"How long were you working with… that group?" It was obvious they existed, they weren't hiding much since the day of the comet, but Fire Nation spies didn't last long around their main camp and outside their camp they were ghosts. They weren't sure of the group's exact name yet. They'd only known it *existed* for two months.

"The White Lotus," Uncle supplied. He touched his beard, stroked it like he was thinking, like it was a regular day on Zuko's ship and none of this had ever happened. "I joined after Lu Ten's death. When I realized how deeply this war was hurting us all, even the Fire Nation."

When his own son had died. Which was so much different than all those other peoples' sons and daughters who'd been dying under his command for *years.* Speared or crushed or buried under earth, still hearing the footsteps of battle above them while they suffocated.

Zuko focused on the wall behind his Uncle, fine gold-toned wood with carvings subtly burned onto select but seemingly random knots in the grain, the beauty-in-disharmony style that Grandmother Ilah had made popular in the capital when she set her artisans lose on the palace. That wall was as far from stone as it could possibly be. He was in the palace, it was just after noon, it would *keep* being just after noon if he could focus on his breathing.

"You were with them when you were on my ship?" he asked. "You… did things for them?"

"Correspondence only," Uncle said, like there were *degrees* to this kind of treachery. "The *Wanyi* was unusually mobile; I was asked to transport messages that might otherwise have difficulty reaching their targets. Packages, occasionally."

So Zuko's ship had been some kind of communications center for a network of spies and backroom revolutionaries. Zuko focused on his breathing, even as a million little memories slid sideways in his head, fitting into a different picture than the one he thought he'd seen.

Had Uncle *actually* lost that damn white lotus tile, or had he been rubbing the joke in Zuko's face before Zuko even knew there *was* a joke? And all those shopping trips, and the boxes Uncle made the crew truddle on board, bought with money from Uncle's estates because *he* wasn't banished, *he* still had titles and land and somewhere to go home to, had he really bought them or were they *packages?* Zuko had never looked past the first stupid hay-cushioned layer of tsungi horns and monkey statues, never *wanted* to. Had Uncle made him transport weapons? People? There had been that stowaway the bounty hunter found, and no one had ever known how he got on board, Lieutenant Jee had *hated* having a sixteen-year-old commander but he'd run a tight ship, except when Uncle was distracting everyone with tea and pai sho and *music night*—

Zuko breathed, and felt the sparks in him breathing with him, coals turning red and black with each inhale and exhale but too used up to catch flame. He was so *cold.*

"Would Ozai have executed the crew if he learned what you were doing? Or just us?" Father wouldn't have believed Zuko didn't know what was happening aboard his own ship. Even if he had, he might have executed Zuko for being too naive to live.

He felt dirty. He felt *used.* He felt like the Agni Kai had started three years ago but it was only yesterday he'd turned around to see who was behind him.

(Azula said Uncle had used him to get to father, but Azula always lied.)

(Unless the truth hurt worse.)

"Zuko—"

Uncle had been a traitor this entire time. He'd never wanted Zuko to go back, never thought he would or could or should even *try,* but—

But never told him there was another option, either. That they could do something different, something that would *help.*

"Why didn't you tell me? Didn't you trust me? Or… was I not good enough?" He'd spent *three years* on father's backhand insult of a quest. He wasn't stupid, he *knew* finding the Avatar was supposed to be impossible. He'd been going insane trying to do it anyway because it was the only thing he had and the ship was too small and no one talked to him except Uncle and half of what Uncle said were proverbs, and there was nothing to do but read the same scrolls over again and try to avoid making port try to avoid the *laughter* as much as he could and practice bending but Zuko was never good enough for Uncle, he'd been stuck on the basics for *three years* like maybe *this time* the frustration of doing the same set of moves would make his breath control *better.*

(He'd had to lock himself in his room and practice with his dao just to stay *sane,* to have one thing the entire world didn't know about him, and he got better and better until the thrill of being good at something almost let him forget the shame of being a better swordsman than a firebender.)

"You were not ready, Zuko. You were too angry, too set on pleasing your father—"

"Because I had nothing else! It was either chase the Avatar or grab a rock and jump in the *ocean.* Tea and pai sho weren't going to get me home, Uncle, not without knowing that they were *secret fucking codes!* When were you planning on mentioning that, when I'd been on the ship *five* years? Ten? When the *Wanyi* broke down and Ozai wouldn't let me have a new ship, and I… I had to follow you into the Earth Kingdom and set up a tea shop because I wasn't legally allowed to settle in *our* territories? I had to lie to everyone we met in that Agni-scorched country, Uncle. Even just standing there and letting them *look* at me was a lie, they saw the scar and the eyes and they thought they *knew* me. Thought I was burned by a soldier, thought I was a *war child.* I had to… to stand there and let them insult our troops, use someone *else's* pain to hide, had to—" Had to act like mother loved him and kept him in spite of his father, which was the grain of truth that sold the act and the part he hated hated hated, because even that wasn't fully true, because mother hadn't loved him enough to take him with her. "How did you expect me to *live* like that, Uncle? Hiding my name, my bending, lying about everything from behind the world's most recognizable face and—and I'm *shit* at lying, you know that, everyone always lies to *me* and I just— Do you know how *scared* I was, every time someone stared at me too long? Every time a guard came in? And you were… what, using the tea shop as a fucking *spy headquarters* while I was out front serving tea and

suffocating? You could have *told* me you were doing something that had meaning, I could have… I could have *helped,* I could have..."

There was a knock on the sliding door. Uncle didn't grant permission, but a guard stuck his head in anyway. "Is everything okay, sirs?" his eyes flicked to Zuko. Again. Zuko stopped shouting at the Agni-appointed leader of their nation. He clenched his hands on his knees and stared at the etchings on the wall and breathed.

"I ordered you to remain outside, Lieutenant."

"My apologies, Your Majesty," the guard bowed, and closed the door again.

Zuko bowed, too. "Please forgive me, Fire Lord Iroh. I intended no disrespect. I did not mean to raise my voice to your person." He never did, but he always ended up like this. Maybe that was why Uncle couldn't trust him.

"Sit up, Zuko. There is nothing to forgive. I know who you are." He was smiling gently, just at the corners of his mouth, like that was a *compliment.*

"Yes, sir," Zuko said, because it was his place to accept whatever offhanded insults the Fire Lord offered him. He straightened out of his bow, and kept staring at the wall. The etching was some kind of animal; a lion-ferret. It was half-curled around a knot in the wood, gold faintly inlaid on its mane. Maybe Azula had a carving like that in the room with her yesterday. It would explain some of the places her mind had wandered.

Iroh waited again. But questions weren't *safe,* and Zuko didn't like the answers anyway. After a quiet interval that probably seemed long to someone who still had a relationship with time, Uncle nodded, and brought their conversation back to where he wanted it to go.

"I am naming you my heir, Zuko. You will be crown prince again. When you turn eighteen, if you feel ready, I will abdicate the throne." (If he met Iroh's standards, he didn't say.) "I would like you to spend this next year taking on whatever responsibilities you are comfortable with, within reason." (The Fire Lord would decide what was within reason, he didn't say.) "You are welcome at every meeting—" (meetings the Fire Lord would lead) "—your voice and

opinions are welcome—" (unless they didn't match Iroh's, and then would he ever see his throne?) "I only want what is best for you." (Did Zuko even *want* the throne?) "And I… will try to be better at communicating. At explaining what I am doing, and why, and asking what *you* want."

(It wasn't about wanting, it was about what his country needed.)

Zuko bowed, forehead not quite on the floor but humbly close. A respect equal to the respect being done him. "Thank you, Fire Lord Iroh. When… when will the coronation be?"

Uncle looked disquieted, somehow, as he watched Zuko straighten again. "When you are ready. We do not need to rush things, Zuko. You should rest." His lips quirked. "A man needs his—"

Zuko wanted to scream, but instead he just blotted out the rest of the old man's words and stared at the lion-ferret.

He had to do this. He had to be prince again, so that he could temper whatever damage the other countries were about to do to his, the Avatar and the White Lotus acting through Iroh like they always had even if Zuko hadn't *known.*

He needed to get out of this room. He was a terrible liar, he needed to *not be here,* not right in front of Iroh where the man could see just how deep his new heir's loyalty ran.

"I'm… I'm tired, Uncle. May I be excused?"

"Of course. Would you consider having dinner with me tonight, Zuko? If you are feeling better?"

"...Just us?"

"Yes."

"I would like that," Zuko said, and somehow Iroh *didn't* catch the lie. He stood, and bowed, and almost made it to the door before he blurted his last question out. "Why was Lu Ten on the front lines?"

Uncle stilled, and let out a slow breath. "He wanted to prove himself. It was not worth his life, Zuko. He had nothing *to* prove. Neither do you."

Zuko wondered if Lu Ten would agree.

Another modest bow, and he opened the door for himself. The guards were way too close to the door, and looking less *guilty* than… anxious, maybe? Iroh wouldn't be able to see them from where he was sitting, and Zuko wasn't about to weasel-rat them out. Even if he was (almost) their crown prince again, and they had to have heard him coming, but they didn't even *try* to hide their eavesdropping.

The servant was gone. One of the guards accompanied him instead, because of course.

"Could I… may I go to the turtleduck pond, please? It's quiet. And there's turtleducks." He wanted to slap a hand to his face, but he was tired and the staff was already well acquainted with his eloquence.

The garden also had walls high enough to feel safe, and enough trees for the guard to at least be *discrete.* Zuko wasn't sure if the man had been taking him back to his own room or to the infirmary. He'd like to put off clarifying that for just awhile longer, even if both were better than prison. He was… pretty sure he wasn't going there, unless Uncle saw through his act. So. He wasn't going there *yet.*

"Yes, sir," the guard said. "Uh. Would you like to stop by the kitchens, first? We could pick up bread."

"I would like that," Zuko said, and meant it.

The sous-chef took one look at him and made him sit down at a table, one of the ones staff used during their breaks. Apparently the kitchen had not been pleased to find their breakfast for him delivered to an empty room. He ate what they put in front of him, more or less, and didn't really remember afterwards what it was. At least they'd been happy to bring him water instead of tea.

"Where's the chef?" Zuko asked.

"Sick relatives," the sous-chef replied. "Finish that, or no bread for your ducks."

Zuko pushed a pile of something-or-another around on his plate, making it look more eaten. This did nothing to fool the sous-chef, who was watching him do it. But it did distract him while the guard surreptitiously stole a loaf. The cooking staff did not care for the palace turtleducks much, ever since Zuko asked the chef to take their wild cousins off the menu.

"One of the servants had sick relatives, too," Zuko said. "Are they from the same town? If there's an illness going around, I could… talk to the Fire Lord. See if he'll send the Avatar's waterbender to help."

"It's not particularly contagious, Your Highness, and rarely lethal when addressed promptly," the sous-chef said, after a moment's hesitation. "Perhaps you should ask the Fire Lord about it. Now *eat."*

Zuko did, but only because it gave the guard time to poach another loaf straight from an oven-fresh tray.

Outside, the pond was… nice? Okay, at least. It was weird, having nothing to do and nowhere to be and noone in particular who wanted him anywhere. Even the turtleducks didn't *need* him; there was plenty to eat in the pond. They just liked bread, and they would have taken it from anyone else with just as much enthusiasm. He broke off crumbs and dropped them in front of his crossed legs, and had the whole flock on him in moments.

He should… probably feel something. He'd been hoping he would, here. There was sun, so he should feel warm; a nice breeze, cute animals half-way climbing onto his lap, memories of his mother somewhere over his shoulder if he could just turn around to see them. But he felt exactly the same here as he had leaving Iroh. He was back to being nothing and noone except what the Fire Lord allowed him to be. It should at least feel *familiar,* but it didn't. Feel like anything.

Iroh hadn't even asked if he *wanted* to be the crown prince again. He'd just… said Zuko would be.

A duck squawked in alarm. The entire flock waddle-threw themselves back into the pond as a shadow blotted out the sun. The guard shouted from somewhere close. Zuko turned around, and came face to nose with the towering form of the Avatar's bison.

Well. At least he could still feel looming dread. That was… nice? Zuko made a token effort to stand, to *move,* because there was a difference between dying and being trampled to death by a *giant six-legged animal,* or letting it *eat him* its mouth was bigger than his room last night—

It licked him.

He could not, apparently, still feel disgust. He just looked down at his newly dampened clothes, and listened to the guard's shout sputter out into confusion, and… wondered what the appropriate reaction to a bison lick was, because the animal seemed to be waiting for something.

Zuko held out the good bread roll. The bison's tongue curled around it, dragging it back into its cavernous mouth. It chewed, and swallowed, and stared down at him again.

It was really, *really* big.

"Uh…"

The bison bundled him up between its front legs, and tipped over on its side with a whumph.

Zuko blinked over at his guard. His guard blinked back.

"I… think it's okay?" Zuko said. "He, umm. He knows me."

"Yes, sir." The guard did not look particularly soothed, but he did retreat back a discrete distance.

The bison was licking his topknot loose. Zuko patted one of the legs holding him to its chest. "I guess you do remember me, huh? Good thing you have better memories of Ba Sing Se than the rest of us."

His hands moved through its fur. He didn't even know what he was looking for until he didn't find it: the furball's legs had healed cleanly, its shackle scars as invisible as Zuko's. But there were other breaks in the fur, the texture familiar under his fingertips—burns. Large ones. Bad enough that the waterbender couldn't heal them away. At least she'd spared the bison the worst of it; it wasn't the initial injury that was bad, but the weeks and months of recovery, the infections and the debridements and the way a wrong touch could make it feel like it was on fire all over again. The bison's scars felt almost as old as his, even though they looked pink and fresh.

"So you were fighting, too."

He'd known that. Could have figured that out, at least. The Avatar had been fighting Ozai when the rest of the fleet was taken down, and it wasn't like the Earth Kingdom had its own airships. The bison must have been the one ferrying their fighters into the sky. It would have made him the prime target for every firebender, the thing they had to take down to save themselves. They hadn't, and they'd died, but… he wouldn't blame the bison for that. Or even the Avatar's group; so many more people would have died if the fleet kept going. He blamed Ozai, and everyone who'd heard the plan but hadn't stopped him. Had anyone else even *tried?*

"I would have. Fought, I mean. I wanted to."

The bison had finished destroying the servants' hard work on his hair. It rested its gargantuan chin on the top of Zuko's head, and whuffed out a breath of air that Zuko could feel over his whole body.

"On your side," he clarified. He kept his voice down, so the guard wouldn't hear. The staff would respect him even less if they knew he'd failed at even being a traitor. "Wouldn't that have been weird?"

The bison rumbled somewhere deep in its chest. It felt like a minor earthquake under him.

"...Do you understand anything I'm saying?"

It made no move to reply. After a moment of staring up at the sun with his face half-covered in bison fur, Zuko tried to squirm free. It grumbled, and tucked a third leg over him.

"You have too many legs," Zuko complained. He felt… sort of irritated. And sort of not. Mostly, he felt like he understood why the Avatar's group was always leaning against the bison's side. It was weirdly comfortable, and the warmest he'd been in weeks, and the bison's heartbeat drowned out his thoughts with the same steady cadence as waves.

Zuko missed the ocean. If he'd been banished again, he could have just… not been here. He hadn't had much on the *Wanyi,* but he'd at least been able to pick where he was going, what he was doing. Even if none of his decisions mattered.

Not even the *bison* was letting him decide things, now. Zuko pushed against its leg again and it didn't budge again and he went from comfortable to trapped in the space of a heartbeat. He could call out for the guard to help but it was a *bison,* how could he get beaten by an *animal.* He shoved again, and tried to kick but that stupid third leg was over his knees and everything was *too tight too close—*

The bison let him go, and rolled back to its feet. Zuko tumbled free and crouched, glaring up at it.

"Let me have a *choice,* okay?"

The bison whuffed and settled back down, staring at him with a black eye bigger than his head. Zuko glared at it, and glared at it. It yawned, and lay its head down.

He inched back to its side. And… sat down. And leaned back. It didn't try to grab him again. For something that didn't understand what he was saying, the bison listened better than most people in his life.

He didn't *want* to be the crown prince again. To be under a Fire Lord again. To be someone's heir, to have his whole future and everything he was be dependant on pleasing them. It was Uncle, but… but he didn't even *know* Uncle.

His country needed him. Uncle didn't have any other heirs yet, the Fire Nation had been through too much and was about to go through worse, the people deserved stability and someone who would fight for them until—

(Until the next time he was thrown away.)

"I have to be prince. There's nothing I can do," he said, and the bison took in a deep breath that pushed at Zuko's back, like a whole-body nudge.

Maybe nothing was exactly what he *should* do.

...Fuck.

Fuck, he *could.*

"...He'd kill me," Zuko said. And he felt something bubbling up inside him, giddy-strange and *certain,* the same as when he'd seen a column of light shoot up from a southern ice pack. Like hope.

Doing nothing meant a lot of work between now and the coronation, if he wanted to do this right. This was the most important fuckup of his life, and he needed to *plan* but he was so tired but he had to get started—

The bison turned its head and whuffed at him again, a little curtly. It was a convincing argument. Zuko leaned back against Appa's side, tilted his head towards the sun, and caught up on all the sleep he didn't get last night.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter: Zuko fucks up royally. Stay tuned!

Chapter 18: Crown Prince

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"A boiling rock," Toph said, "Yeah. That sounds *great* for my feet."

She was sprawled on her back in the courtyard, her toes dug under the tiles so she could get that sweet sweet grit all up between them. Also, dust up the back of the formal robes the servants had rustled up in her size. The others told her they were suitably green, so she was color-coded for the convenience of all the sighted people. Just once, she wanted to go in a clothing shop, mix everything up, and come out in colors so uncoordinated that people would have to pay attention to the person under the clothes. Maybe she could take Sparky with her.

"Not *a* boiling rock," Sokka corrected, " *The* Boiling Rock. Apparently it's this big bad prison where they stick all the leaders, so dad *and* Suki (sigh) are there!"

Toph wasn't sure if he *knew* he kept doing those little sighs after her name, but it was starting to get on her nerves. She didn't know why it bugged her, and she didn't *want* to know, she just wanted to chuck a pebble at his head. So she did.

"Oww!" he said. Then: "I will choose to interpret that as an expression of your happiness for me."

"You do that," Toph agreed. "I'm still staying here. And so are you."

Sokka grumbled something surly, and then his whole stance flinched. She was pretty sure he just instinctively covered his head, so the next pebble was aimed for his ribs.

" *Oww!"*

Score.

"It's Sparky's coronation. You are *not* skipping out. Uncle already sent a be-nice-to-these-prisoners hawk, right? So you're going to be a good Ambassador Snoozles and represent your nation. It's not like everything's going to go wrong just because you wait a day."

"That's exactly what people say before everything goes wrong," his grumbling continued, and his weight shifted a little, all light on his feet and balanced, the way he did before he dodged. But he was *expecting* her to throw things, so she tucked her hands back behind her head and just terrorized him with the *anticipation* of the throw.

Also, kind of ignored him for awhile. Because she needed to concentrate on her feet.

The palace was a spiderwasp hive of activity. The wood floors and tatami mats made it hard to get fine details from any distance, but right underneath was a nice layer of stone tile, just like in the courtyard. Apparently firebenders knew how to make a place not-immediately-combustible. She liked it here. Might even take Sparky up on his offer to freeload, if Uncle didn't make her go back to her parents when all this was done.

Katara and Aang were easy to find: they were just back in the room. Aang had played the *I really need help getting these robes on* card and Katara was pretending to fall for it, and Aang's heart was all *we're alone* nervous and so was Katara's, but Toph wasn't so sure they were nervous for the same reasons, and wasn't sure *they* weren't sure, and if they could both just stop being all fluttery-hearted and *gross* that would be *great.*

She looked further, past the nobles being snooty to each other in corners as they waited for the show to start, past the servants rushing around in last minute panic, past the clerk who'd brought that prisoner list to Sokka on orders from his *new* Fire Lord and then promptly holed back up in the room all the clerk-types liked to hide in.

Past all that mess, she found Sparky. He was by that muddy sludge pit of fuzzy-vision that everyone else called the turtleduck pond, leaning back against Appa.

Oh man, when the others had first caught those two together? *Priceless.* Twinkletoes had been freaking out because Appa had been gone from their courtyard for so long, and completely ignoring her reassurances that the big floofball was fine. He'd disappeared the

same way yesterday, hadn't he? And the day before? For some crazy-strange reason, her smiles made Aang even *more* alarmed. So he took off on that glider of his to get the aerial view… and Toph had ssshed the others, and hustled them through the palace to catch the show.

"Huh," Katara said.

"What am I seeing," Sokka said.

"Couldn't tell you," Toph said, "but if you wake him up early, it's the *last* thing you'll see."

"That is a sufficiently terrifying threat, yes," he whispered. "So. You brought us here to see Zuko… taking the world's most comfortable looking Appa-nap?"

"Nope," Toph said. "I brought you here to watch *Aang* see it."

Right on time, she felt the world's lightest twelve-year-old return to sweet sweet earth. His heart was still edge-of-fear fast, but his breathing was already smoothing out with relief.

"Appa!" Aang shouted.

Give it a beat, wait for it (and oh, she knew that Katara and Sokka would never admit it, but she could *feel* them waiting for it right with her).

"Zuko?"

Aang still had kind of a *complex* about Sparky. Didn't like getting too close to him. Toph gave the ground under him a helpful nudge, and felt him stumble a step closer.

"Why don't you poke him with your staff," she grinned.

"Uh… I don't think that's a good idea?"

Pfft. Even his *voice* lacked rock-like confidence. If he'd stood up for himself and given her a 'no' smackdown, she might have let him off the hook. But Twinkletoes needed confidence, and Sparky needed friends.

And Sparky hadn't tried to find her *once* since the fight with Uncle—even though she'd been very clearly available for finding—like he didn't even think she *was* his friend. And when she'd devoted her precious time to tracking *him* down, he'd brushed her off with stupid *I'm fine* lies that were oddly not-lying but they *had* to be, no one could be *fine* again that quick. Even worse were his *I'm busy* claims when he didn't have any responsibilities right now (still not a lie) and his stupid *You'd know if I was lying so I can't tell you* excuses when she called him on it. *It's a surprise,* he'd said, and it felt like a mix between when he'd let Sokka walk off with a plate full of fire-salmon and when he'd been laughing on the courtyard ground.

Please don't tell Uncle, he'd said, while his heart was saying *I want to trust you but I've already got plans for when you betray me.*

I'm not going to rat you out, she'd said.

If I tell you, he said, *you will.* And there'd been such certainty in voice and breath and heart and his guttering almost non-bender chi that Toph had, for just a second, wondered if he was right. By the time she'd realized how stupid that was, that *of course* she knew herself better than he did, he was already hiding back in his room and the gaurds wouldn't let her smash her way inside.

If he didn't want her around because he was afraid of her sheer powers of awesomeness figuring out whatever he was up to, then fine. But he was getting another friend, to the *face.* She slid a foot back, then shot both hands forward, and sent Aang stumble-falling straight on top of the jerk who didn't realize how lonely he'd felt when he'd walked away from her.

"Sorry sorry sorry!" Aang tried to scramble back, but mostly just fell over in new and exciting ways. Appa yawned.

"Go away, Avatar," the Fire Prince said, giving him a groggy shove. "Don't need to capture you." He rolled over, and fell back asleep. Which was another thing: he'd been doing all his sleeping during the day, mostly on top of a bison. Whatever he was up to, the prep work happened at night. Sometimes he just paced around his room, and sometimes he went out the window. No one had told Toph he was an *untrackable ninja,* he hadn't even known she was *there* and he'd lost her. Stupid wooden center beams in stupid roofs.

A smallish turtleduck popped into existence at the water's edge. It gave itself a shake, then waddled over, and climbed up Appa's leg to reach a comfortable sunny perch. It was too light to track in all that fluff, but then *Zuko* got a little heavier. And a little grumblier. She was pretty sure that was a turtleduck nestled up next to his back.

"What," Sokka said. More ducks waddled out and over and up, which was about the time Sokka had to have a sit-down. "...This is not allowed to be so cute. It's *Zuko.* Zuko and Appa. Zuko and *fluffy little half-grown turtleducks.* Perching. Perching everywhere."

"...Huh," Katara repeated, in complete agreement.

Aang just kind of stood there. Much closer to Zuko than he normally did, so that was a win. "Uh. Have they been doing this every day?"

"Naw," Toph said, and felt three heartbeats rise with hope (and one stay sleep-slow). "The turtleducks are new."

One of these days she was going to figure out the heartbeat-reaction equivalent of *painting a picture so it'll last longer.*

That had been a week ago. Zuko had been pretty insistent that they get the coronation thing over with fast, even though Uncle didn't want to rush his recovery. Uncle had even come to her for a heart-health consultation, but all she would give him was that Sparky always felt *worse* when Uncle talked about putting it off. And her personal guess that, hey, maybe Zuko

would like some *stability* back in his life, instead of being in this weird between-official-roles limbo.

She didn't tell Uncle how *nervous* Sparky got during their dinners together, or how his heart rate didn't smooth out until he was face-first back in the bed in his own room. Uncle needed to *talk* to him. Not give him space and time to recover; just bundle him up in a hug and hold on until he stopped squirming and *talked.* As awesome as Uncle was, he sucked at this family thing as much as… well, the rest of his family. The Bei Fongs looked high-functioning by comparison.

Right now, Zuko was in his happy place with Appa, but there were no naps occuring. His heart rate was above baseline and staying that way with a weird steadiness that said *preparation.* Which, duh. Coronation in an hour. But… she'd been expecting more fidgeting. Sparky wasn't a sit-there-and-be-calm kind of guy, but there he was, sitting there. Making himself be calm. Which seemed like a little *too much* preparation for a hyped-up ceremony where he just had to kneel and repeat after the Fire Sage, and not have his hair spontaneously combust before they could get the crown pinned in.

"I'm going to check on Sparky," Toph announced. "Want to come?"

"You mean, stare at the Zuko-and-Fluffy-Animals Cuteness Overload Happy Funtime Hour?" Sokka asked. "...Yeah, I'm in. Aang! Katara! We're going to go poke at Zuko!"

"Not *literally,* Sokka," Katara shouted back.

"No promises!"

Toph couldn't tell if Sparky looked up or not when they entered the garden. Too much fur at his back, dampening his weight shifts. But his breathing lost its rhythm, just for a moment, and his heart rate ticked up a notch. A *he still didn't trust her* notch.

"Relax," Toph said, diving into the floof next to him. "I'm not going to ask you anything."

"...Thanks." He meant it. And he *believed* her. Breath steady and heart rate back down again. "Toph. Ambassador. Um. Good morning?"

"Yeah, it's okay, I know it's weird. I'm just here for the cute under-cooked animals," Sokka said, and tried to pet a turtleduck that was perched on one of Appa's many knees. *"Oww!"*

"Watch out for Sugar Snap. She's wild."

"Why do you have a wild *flightless bird* in the middle of your *walled garden,"* Sokka demanded, "and who named her *Sugar Snap."*

"The cook was—so I—and she bites *really hard* so we can't get her out again but she's actually really sweet to her babies so… so Sugar Snap. It's, umm. It's a type of nut-pea?" Zuko sputtered.

"I am aware of sugar snaps, yes. I am confused by the rest of this."

Frowns were a tone of voice. So were glares and glowers. Sparky had a neat trick to combine all three. "Was there something you *wanted?"*

"We're just proving a point," Toph said.

"What?"

She poked his arm. Yeah, he was just as tense as she'd figured. "That friends don't need to hang out with friends just because they *want* something, Sparky. You doing okay? Nervous?"

"No," his voice said. *Terrified,* his heart put in. Man, he couldn't lie to save his life.

"You want to talk about it?"

" *No."*

"You want to tell Ambassador Snoozles which ducks won't sprain his fingers?"

"...No." He said that. But he still did, by body language alone—Sokka kept reaching slowly towards different ducks, and Sparky got tenser and tenser until yep, *that* duck made him relax.

Quack, the duck said, and tolerated head pats.

"Did you name all of them?" Sokka asked. "Did you name all of them after *food?"*

"No. Shut up."

"Hey, I'm not judging. Naming food after food is kind of genius. Like suggesting a sidedish."

Sokka, Toph admitted, was a master of distraction. By the time the servant came to collect Sparky, he was as close to relaxed as she'd ever felt him. Shouting at people over stupid things calmed him right down. From the laughter just on the edge of Sokka's breaths, she suspected he'd noted that effect, too.

"Hey," Sokka said, as the servant dragged Zuko away. "Why weren't you getting ready with your Uncle? I know he wanted you to."

"I just… had to go over some things. In my head."

Truth.

"Arms out, Your Highness," the servant said, already attacking the back of his robes with… was that a brush? Ooooh, bison fur. "There's a reason we asked that you wait *inside,* Your Highness."

"Sorry," Sparky mumbled, and fidgeted, and somehow still managed to convey an absolute lack of regret. The servant sighed.

"Just stand there and look pretty," Toph called after him. "Those sage guys will do the hard work."

"Sure," said his voice. His heart was saying something else, but even if it was three times faster than a scripted ceremony deserved, the beat was strong and healthy, and it was going to make it through this just fine no matter what he feared. "...Toph? Thank you."

"Friends," Toph said. "No thanks required."

"Bye, Plum Tart," Sokka said, patting his duck one last time. "You would be delicious stuffed with your namesake."

The coronation took place out in the main courtyard in front of the palace. Lots of room for witnesses; official court people got to kneel on the pillows in the roped off area up front, plebeians from the city were granted the right to stand in back. It was a pretty decent crowd. There was all kinds of empty small talk about how the cloudless sky was a good omen, and the scorching sun a clear sign that Agni blessed the new Fire Lord's not-so-new heir. They didn't say that last part, but everyone was so carefully *not* saying it that it was getting on Toph's nerves. Everything out of their mouths was careful flattery, pitched to be heard by the other courtiers around them, repeats of the same safe phrases everyone else was saying.

"This place is messed up," Sokka whispered. "Is no one going to mention that the Fire Lord is making the *former* Fire Lord his heir? Are they having coordinated amnesia?"

"It's just a different culture," Aang said. "Kuzon always used to say that in the Fire Nation, everyone has two faces: your true one, and the one you wear in public. They probably talk about it a lot, just… not here."

"Huh," Sokka said. "Maybe that's why Zuko sucks so bad at life. He's only got the one face."

"Public face on, Ambassador Snoozles," Toph said. "You keep talking, someone's going to hear you."

Katara didn't say much at all, just sat next to Aang and stared up at the stone stage. But she'd made the very deliberate decision to leave her waterskin back in the room for the first time since they'd set foot in the Fire Nation. Toph was going to take that truce for what it was, and hope that Sparky noticed, too.

The ceremony started.

It probably looked really pretty. Wait, not pretty—what was the one that wasn't lame? Impressive. It probably looked *impressive.* She could feel a lot of metal with the almost-liquidy-ness she associated with sustained high heat; lamps and torches and big ol' bowls of fire. And everybody was taking really careful steps and swooshing when they moved and weighing about ten pounds more than usual, so she was guessing fancy robes all around. Uncle and Sparky's had actual gold and a few gemstones worked into the designs, which had to make them *super* fancy. She spent most of the blah-blah trying to figure out what they depicted. Dragons, probably, but what did dragons *look* like? Also, she wondered if she could convince people to do more art with metal and stone. Or writing, how cool would that be? Ground rock mixed with ink, maybe (though since she was the only one it would benefit, the merchant daughter in her grumbled about wasted investments; limited customer bases only worked when the product was expensive and the customers *filthy rich.* Bei Fongs made things *into* money, they didn't *spend* money.)

Some guy took three steps forward, put something on something else, then took three steps back. Ugh. Back to zoning out.

How many blind people in the world were there? How many were earthbenders, how many good enough to learn even a fraction of her technique, how many had the money to afford special modestly-overpriced-ink and the clout to make people around them *use* it? And they'd

have to learn to read first, which she'd inferred was a pretty hefty time investment. Naw, there was no way this would turn a profit.

More micro movements up on the stage, and somebody reciting some blessing in Ye Olde Firespeak, probably praising Agni, and—oh no, seriously? And now they were *reading the royal pedigree.* Zuko was the son of the daughter of the daughter of the son of…

Nice that they didn't just trace through the male line. Some areas of the Earth Kingdom could still be really stupid about that. If it wasn't for the helpless blind child thing, Toph was *pretty* sure her dad would let her inherit. Maybe. He *really* didn't like his brother.

...Okay, how was Sparky managing to stay tense even listening to *this?* As soon as the ceremony and well-wishings were over, she was dragging him somewhere and *making* him relax. Somehow. Maybe Sokka could steal a turtleduck, and the two of them could run around for awhile. Sparky wasn't doing so hot with the sparking just now, but maybe breaking things and shouting would get whatever this was out of his system.

Finally someone plucked the little gold hairpiece-crown off its stand and carried it forward. Iroh lifted it to the sky and asked for his ancestor Agni to witness, and handed it to the super old sage guy who felt as crumbly-dry as sandstone but had chi lines sharp as flint. Zuko stepped forward, facing his Uncle, and sage guy invited him to kneel and Toph promised herself *not* to tune this part out, this was what she was supposed to pay attention to and compliment everyone on later.

But, um. Was Sparky freaking out? 'Cause his heart rate had just spiked, and he was making the sage guy repeat himself, and…

"Shit," Sokka whispered next to her. Which confirmed that the sighted people were seeing this, too. There wasn't some explanation that just hadn't touched the ground yet.

"Kneel to receive your crown, Prince Zuko," the sage tried, one more time. And now *sage guy's* heart and *Uncle's* heart and *everyone in the crowd's* hearts were picking up speed, just as Zuko's was calming down.

"No," Sparky said.

"Shit shit *shit,"* Sokka said.

"I've already been Fire Lord. I won't be a prince again."

He kept talking. He kept talking, fast like he expected to get interrupted and wanted to get out as much as he could before then. Fast, but loud and clear, and she realized she *knew* these breaths and these weight shifts as he gestured, recognized them from those nights he'd holed himself up in his room. He'd *practiced* this.

"I tried for so long to please my father instead of doing what's right. This… this isn't right. And you're not my father, but if you keep working with the Avatar and the White Lotus you're going to destroy our nation as surely as he did. We can't... We can't just kneel in front of the other countries and beg for mercy. He—they won't—it's not going to work. They've hated us so long, they'll ruin us now if we let them. What we've done for the last hundred years—it hasn't been right, either. But the individual people of the Fire Nation... They didn't do this. They just didn't *stop* it. Our people need to—to do what's right instead of just listening to whoever's strongest. You defeated me, but that wasn't right either, that was—I've done my best, I've tried to stop the war and work with the other nations, but I will not bow to them. And I won't bow to you. I'm… I'm done bowing. The Fire Nation needs to find its honor again, but it won't find it on its knees, and it won't find it working with a child that can tear the fire from our *souls.* I don't know how you're going to fix this, I don't know how *I* would have fixed this, but I won't sit at your side and pretend to condone what you're doing."

"Zuko, don't do this. You don't *need* to agree with me, that is not why I want you as heir—"

"The last time I disagreed, you *dethroned* me." Sparky shrugged one shoulder, feeling lighter than she'd ever sensed him. "Find another heir, Fire Lord Iroh. I have sick relatives to visit."

The court held its breath as the former Fire Lord turned his back on the current, and hopped off the stage. He didn't quite stick the landing, and his legs were going all wobbly under those concealing robes as he strode away. Toph wasn't sure if he'd done it to be dramatic or because he was too deep in *I-just-did-that* shock to find the stairs.

Iroh made some gesture and the guards followed, but their weight had already been shifting towards Zuko before the order came. She really hoped that was one of those things it was easy for sighted people to miss because—

Because you didn't *do* that. Didn't disrespect a king or a Fire Lord like that, and just walk away. Not without nobles watching and judging and barely holding in their murmurs for a safer place, not without guards moving to flank and protect their *old* Fire Lord without the permission of their new one. Not without walking off with part of the current ruler's power. And Uncle, if he wanted to stay on the throne… He'd need to get that power back, wouldn't he?

She'd been right: Sparky could have kept his mouth shut, gotten his crown, and worked to fix things as Uncle's heir. Could have.

But Zuko really *couldn't* lie to save his life.

%%%

"Sir," one of the guards said to him, at the door to Zuko's room. "Your Maj—"

"Don't," he said. "I… appreciate it. But don't. I'll just… be inside, okay? Let me know when the Fire Lord figures out what to do with me."

"Sir," the guard said, and all of the ones who followed him bowed too low for a prince, especially one who'd functionally abdicated his position. Which was… it was *stupid,* they were going to get themselves killed if anyone loyal to Iroh saw.

But it was their decision to make.

This was his.

Zuko closed the door behind him, and went to his desk. His knife was waiting—he'd left it out, hadn't known how much time he'd have, hadn't even been sure if Iroh would let him make it back here or would just have had him arrested on stage. It was pretty weak, that Uncle hadn't.

(Had he meant it? His apology, the crown, the abdication—)

Not his problem anymore.

Zuko unsheathed the blade, and held it to his topknot. Hesitated. Not because of… not because of his speech (which he'd practiced and practiced but *still* fumbled his way through), not because maybe Uncle had meant everything he'd said (what would it even change, he always assumed he knew best; even if he still loved Zuko he'd keep *doing things like this,* over and over, and Zuko just… he wanted to make his own decisions.) Not that stuff. Because (this was stupid) because he'd already cut his hair for a Fire Lord once, already cut it for his *father* once, and it had taken months to grow back.

So. Fuck it.

Zuko let his hand drop. He retied his hair. Not a topknot or a wolftail or an Earth Kingdom braid, just a loose no-name tail at the base of his neck. Just to keep it out of his face. It wasn't a symbol of his honor; it was only hair. And he *liked* his hair.

Then he let out a breath, and went out the window. Everything he needed was already outside of the city, all the new supplies stashed away with the war balloon. The one he'd never reached the day he tried to rescue Uncle, tried to join the Avatar, tried to be someone he wasn't. He didn't know *who* he was anymore, but fuck that too. He was alive; he'd figure it out.

He left the knife behind, centered on his empty desk.

Never give up without a fight.

He wasn't that anymore, either.

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"Well *he* picked the worst time to grow a moral backbone," Sokka said, as they hid back in their room. Just the original Gaang. Iroh… was a little busy, right now. "I didn't think he even knew what the 'sick relatives' thing *meant."*

"Wait, what does it mean?" Aang asked.

Sokka was willing to let Katara field that one, and didn't even weasel-rat out that *she* hadn't known what it meant until a few days ago, either. When all those missing staff members had gotten her *concerned,* and she'd gone to the palace doctor to offer her help, and come back later looking like someone had tipped the world on its side.

Toph was laying outside on the veranda, her feet dangling down to touch stone.

"Any trouble?" he asked her, and she… didn't respond. "Toph?"

"I'll let you know if they come for us with pitchforks, Ambassador Snoozles. Otherwise, I'm staying out of this one."

Katara was still explaining to Aang and Sokka was half-listening to that, which was why it maybe took him too long to put the pieces together.

Toph was staying out of things.

Which implied something to stay out *of.*

And Zuko… was the most literal person he'd ever met.

"...He's visiting sick relatives," Sokka said. "He's *visiting sick relatives.* Toph, where's Iroh?"

"This is me, staying out of it," the earthbender said, which did nothing to help his sudden desire to hyperventilate.

"Toph," he tried again, because apparently Katara's constant hope for the world was a family trait. "Where's *Zuko?"*

Toph smirked.

Sokka ran. The servants, it should be noted, were *politely useless* in helping him find their Fire Lord.

%%%

The birds were jealous and the rabbits didn't care and all the dragons were dead or caged except the last two, one curled fat and happy around his throne while the other circled his feet, content to betray her for scraps. Really, it was too much to ask for Azula to remain sane. What was her *motivation?*

Someone knocked on her wall. Twice. The wall next to her window, her window next to a sharp drop down to a rock-strewn ocean. Her window was cliff-adjacent, as if someone was trying to *gently dissuade* her from going outside. Unless, of course, it was a final sort of trip. Such a subtly charming view.

"Zuzu," she addressed the knocking, "I am getting *sick* of hallucinating you. If you're real, come inside. If not, kindly fuck off."

"Umm, it's going to take a second. Can you burn through the bars, or do I need to get the screws out?"

She stalked to the window, and threw back the curtains. Her older brother was hanging onto the window ledge by the tips of his fingers.

Given that this idiocy was beneath her mind, Azula tentatively allowed for the situation to be real.

"If I burn your fingers, you'll fall. One by one, how many will it take?" She leaned her face against the bars, and breathed a tongue of fire into the air above his head. And what was *with* that tail he'd put his hair into, was he an Earth Kingdom peasant? "Where is your crown, Zuzu? The birds chitter-chattered all about the coronation."

"I told him to fuck off," her brother grinned.

"What."

He propped an elbow on the window sill. "I mean, not like *that.* But… in a speech? It would have been better but I forgot half of it—"

"Zuzu. Focus, please."

"Could we get these bars off, first? Not the best toeholds here, Azula."

Azula rolled her eyes in a suitably dramatic fashion, and blew a few strands out of her face while she was at it. Then she punched the window out of its frame. His flinch was quite lovely as it flew just over his head and down down down, all the way to the ocean below.

You could have hit me, he would say.

I might have fallen, he would say.

"Why does *no one* need me to escape?" he huffed. "You burned through days ago, didn't you?"

She shrugged, and examined her nails. "I was bored."

"Why didn't you leave?"

I had nowhere to go, she could say.

The cliff was tall-short and the ocean far-close and the walls wouldn't stop moving no matter how much I screamed at them, she could say.

She crossed her arms, and raised an eyebrow. "Zuzu, have you any idea how much property damage I *haven't* done yet? I'm quite sure the royal treasury is footing the bill. This place would look simply lovely with new renovations, and I'm sure the staff would come to *appreciate* my efforts."

He hooked a hand on the stub of a remaining bar, and pulled himself up. Didn't come inside. Sat there right on the ledge like he trusted her *not* to push him. One light shove and down down down just like the bars and maybe then all these chitter-chatterers would *leave her alone.*

"I'm leaving," he said, with a voice that didn't *sound* like it came from her head (why would she leave where would she go). "Want to come with?"

"Leaving," she repeated dryly. "Where?"

"No idea." He shrugged, and *smiled.* "Maybe we could find a nice Earth Kingdom family to adopt us."

"And you graciously decided to invite me along on your," she rolled her wrist, and wiggled her fingers with all due scorn. *"Field trip."*

"Yeah."

This had to be a hallucination, because Zuzu did not *smile* like that, not like he was a commoner without a care in the world or a thought in his head or the weight of expectations the need to be better best perfect. He had *never* smiled like that.

She poked him in the chest. One finger, with more and more and more pressure as he sat smiling over that drop. He didn't flinch. Didn't even *look* at it, maybe she *should* push him, maybe she *would.*

"Why?"

Another shrug how dare he keep aiming those at *her.*

"I decided I'll trust you."

"Until…?"

"I don't think that's how trust is supposed to work, Azula."

"You're a fool."

"Am I a fool *you* can trust?" Stop shrugging, stop smiling, *stop it.* "Come with me, Lala."

He held out a hand. As if following him out over a *literal cliffside* was a good idea. As if he was really here and he really cared and he would really give up his crown to come wander the world with a little sister who could only ever look at a person in a window frame and contemplate how hard to push them.

But she hadn't pushed him. And if he wasn't real, then he could be… he could be better than a real person. He would *want* her, he would never leave her, never betray her, a real person couldn't do that but this smiling hallucination who knocked on walls, who'd stayed up all night and talked her through the chattering birds, he could.

She took his hand, and pulled him inside.

"Very well. But we're using the *door,* Zuzu. Former royalty is still royalty."

"All right. But we're not killing anyone on the way out. *Or* maiming them."

"Oh? And you'll stop me?"

"Yeah. You can choose to hurt people if you want, Azula, but I'll stand between you and them. That's *my* choice."

"I *will* hurt you, brother."

"Yeah. Um. My fire's gone. So the next time you do the lightning thing, it's going to kill me. Just… so you know." He scratched at the back of his head, then paused, looking briefly surprised to remember his own terrible choice in hair styling. Then he dropped his hand, and shrugged again. "Come on, we'd better go before Uncle figures out where I went. I… um, I kind of *told* him—"

"You *what."*

"—It slipped out, okay! But I don't think he understood? It looked like he thought I meant something else."

"What did you say?"

"That I was visiting sick relatives."

"You said that. In front of the whole court and all the rabbit-mice who'd come to watch. You said *that?"*

"Yes…?"

Azula laughed. She continued laughing, all the way out. This had the benefit of sending the doctors and nurses skitter-skattering out of her way like the head-sucking leech-ticks they were, and the guards Uncle had left looked at Zuko, and bowed, and stood aside.

She could almost pretend the bows were for her, too.

%%%

"Azula has escaped," Iroh said.

Sokka wondered whether Zuko *knew* he'd just started a civil war. Because everyone else in the capital sure did, even if it was only whispers and side-glances hidden behind all those public faces of theirs. And Sokka was starting to be a little afraid that not only was he *right* about Zuko's evil mastermind abilities, but that they were *completely unintentional.* Which made him a whole lot more dangerous, really.

They had to capture the Fire Prince. Fast. Before the whispers spread too far, or got too loud, or gave the wrong people the hope to fight back.

The irony did not escape him.

%%%

End Book 0: Prologue (By Summer's End) (Zuko's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day)

Chapter End Notes

Prologue complete. Let's get this story started, yo. <3

Regarding the Book 0 title: remember the date Roku said they had to defeat the Fire Lord by? Good job, Gaang, you did it!

Book 1: Autumn (Unbowed) (These Aren't The Field Trips You're Looking For) is up next, after a brief message from our sponsor, John Denver.

Chapter 19: Interlude: Leavin' on a War Balloon

Chapter Notes

A little something to tide you over. Regular updates to resume after the Season One finale of Little Zuko.

"Less flame, more heat. And just… keep it steady, not so fast—"

"Zuzu. If *you* figured it out, I'm sure I'll manage."

The ground below them sunk away with alarming rapidity.

%%%

"Do you remember that one summer, when Mom and Uncle took us up Mount Taishin?"

"No, Zuko, I was *four."*

"How do you know you were four if you don't—"

"Is there a point to this happy family recollection?"

"Remember how when we got up really high, it got harder to breathe?"

She eased back on her flames. Slightly. For entirely unrelated reasons.

%%%

"Zuzu. I cannot help but notice that this balloon is bending-powered. What *was* your plan if I hadn't come along?"

"What would have been the point in going without you?"

"Cute. You didn't have one, did you?"

"...Do I ever?"

"I suppose that answers the question 'where are we going.' "

"Actually, there's an island we should stop to rest at before trying to cross. Unc—Iroh used to say the ruins there were interesting. Really overgrown and full of mosquito-ticks, but interesting."

"Zuzu, what part of 'ruins with large bugs' makes this *interesting?* He couldn't have made the place less appealing if he tried."

"Boring is good, though. No one should look for us there, and it's uninhabited."

"Oh, I'm sure no one will be looking for you at all. You're only visiting sick relatives, after all. You told them so *earnestly."*

"...I'm going to sleep."

"You do that."

"I can't sleep when you're *laughing."*

"How unfortunate."

%%%

Turbulence. Azula swore exactly like someone trying to be a sailor.

"Did you learn those from me?"

"You're *sleeping."*

%%%

"...Maybe we could look for mother."

"If she was alive, she would have found you when you were banished. She wouldn't just abandon *you."*

"Maybe she tried, but she couldn't find me."

"That would mean she didn't *look,* Zuzu."

%%%

"You're getting good at this. Just keep us at this altitude, this air current is perfect."

"I hardly need advice on perfection from *you.* Or the wind. The world at large, really."

%%%

"She's dead, you know."

"Yeah."

"It's better."

"...Yeah."

%%%

"...What does 'sick relatives' mean? —Stop laughing, oh Agni, Azula we're *falling,* breath control, *breathe—"*

%%%

"Do you think Ty Lee and Mai would like to come? ...Azula?"

%%%

"You *what?"*

%%%

"They're *where?"*

%%%

" *Azula."*

%%%

"Her uncle *runs* the place, Dum-Dum."

%%%

"Are you going to sulk the *entire balloon ride?"*

%%%

" *Fine,* we'll pick up your traitor girlfriend."

%%%

"Technically she was just being loyal to her future Fire Lord."

"Technically, she was being *disloyal* to her future Fire Lord. And her current one."

"...Huh."

"What?"

"Everyone in our family got a turn on the throne. You'd almost think we shared well."

"We really don't."

"...They can still be your friends, too. I think they were just—"

"Zuzu. I believe that we can both agree that I have been courteously lax in testing your *convenient inability* to redirect my bending."

"...Uh."

" *Go to sleep,* Zuzu. I'll wake you when it's time to break ingrates from our nation's most secure prison."

"Do we have a plan?"

"Has that ever stopped you?"

"...Night, Lala."

"...Goodnight, Dum-Dum."

Chapter 20: Favorite Prisoner

Chapter Notes

We're back~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book 1: Autumn (Unbowed) (These Aren't The Field Trips You're Looking For)

20. Favorite Prisoner

Getting angry didn't help. Thinking of escape—or worse, *rescue*— didn't help. Months at the Boiling Rock had taught Suki to take her pleasures from the petty victories in life.

It was too damn hot here, even for the Fire Nation prisoners. She smirked whenever one got hauled to medical with heat stroke, while she was still standing.

There was a rust spot just outside the warden's office. She watered it with her mop, and watched it grow. Maybe one day the man would fall right through the floor. She had time.

Her favorite, of course, the one that gave her bone-deep satisfaction, was that she could measure her time here in Fire Lords. Fire Lord Ozai, smacked down from the sky at the height of his power by her friends (they were still alive, they were still fighting, they were *winning).* Fire Lord Azula, the one who'd thrown her in here, was only mentioned for a day; then the guards uneasily avoided her name (and gossiped ruthlessly about her downfall, the rumors out of the palace, how she'd lost her mind under the pressure and they didn't mean that figuratively). Fire Lord Zuko, the anger case who'd burned her village down, had been overthrown by his own uncle just last week. Factoring in Uncle Backstabber's political experience… she gave him a year. Then it was goodbye to Sozin's line on the throne, and she'd outlasted them all. Would there be a civil war? Suki hoped there would be a civil war. Let the Fire Nation's military class tear each other apart.

She'd found other things at the Boiling Rock, too. Things that were… unexpectedly good.

She was the youngest prisoner here, and the smallest, and a girl on an isolated island where most people were men and criminals, the guards included. This wasn't a *desirable* job posting. She'd been ready to fight since the moment she was brought here. Been ready to lose, eventually, because she was alone and the strength of the Kyoshi warriors was in their teamwork. Waiting for someone to try it had kept her awake in the night, kept her bristling during the day. It took her two weeks to realize that the patrols going past her room were always the same handful of guards, and this *wasn't* their regular route.

"My daughter's a little younger than you," one of the men told her, when he'd caught her wary stare. Which was everything she needed to hear on the subject— *more* than she needed to hear. She wasn't ready, in that first month, to start thinking of them as people. It was easier to keep them all together as enemies. One ethnicity, one nation, one box, separate from herself.

And then, suddenly, they weren't. There were political dissenters who'd spoken out against the war, deserters who'd had enough, criminals who were just as commonplace-awful as in any nation. There were intense mealtime debates over what each new Fire Lord meant for their country, and learning which guards would let them talk treason about royalty—which would even join in—and which would throw everyone in the cooler for even a disrespectful glance towards the current ruler's portrait.

Then there was Sokka's father. She saw him in the yard the day the new political prisoners arrived and knew he couldn't be anyone *else,* and it hurt to see what Sokka would grow into (tall and defiant, and the sense of humor did *not* improve with age) because she was in here, growing in different ways. They'd only kissed twice, but it was war, and she didn't know when she'd kiss a boy again. He'd told his father about her. Hakoda swore he'd have her back in here, and she swore the same. They had to stick together, he'd said, and it took her longer than it should to realize he meant *against all the Fire Nation scum around us.*

The other prisoners were out of their box, and she couldn't put them back. For his first lunch under the Boiling Rock's hospitality, Suki led Hakoda to sit between a man who'd been imprisoned for subversive poetry pamphlets and a woman who'd crippled her commanding officer when she caught him burning an Earth Kingdom child. Hakoda looked thoroughly uncomfortable. Suki realized she wasn't. Not anymore.

And then the Fire Princess' lackeys showed up, in prison uniforms.

The bouncy one dumped extra bleach into the laundry, and everyone was wearing *pink* for a month, and there went any hope Suki'd ever had of keeping *them* in the box.

"So, what are you in for?" Suki asked, sitting next to the one that *wouldn't* mentally exhaust her in a conversation.

"Poor taste in men," the knife girl droned.

"Same," Suki replied. "Also, I almost kicked your princess' ass."

"Same."

"Suki."

"Mai."

"Ty Lee! Oh gosh, did I startle you? I'm so sorry—"

Mai didn't get special treatment for being the warden's niece. He made that point very clear, with the feverish military rigidness of a man obeying rules to the letter. Same cells, same food, same work, same clothes. And if he avoided talking to her at all rather than debasing her like the other prisoners, well, there wasn't a law about how often he had to personally make each inmate miserable.

"I'm sure my parents have disowned me by now, too," the girl said. "I'm no longer politically viable."

"Oh, Mai," Ty Lee hugged her friend, who took great pains to *not* acknowledge said hug. "I'm sure as soon as Azula forgives us, your family will talk to you again!"

"Thanks, Ty Lee," the girl said. Suki was beginning to admire how one-voice-fits-all her monotone was.

Her new allies were cautiously, fearfully optimistic when Azula's portrait took its place on the prison wall.

They were confused but heart-breakingly *hopeful* when Zuko's replaced it.

They'd already stopped glancing at it when, two months later, he was replaced.

A week into his reign, Fire Lord Iroh sent a hawk, suggesting that the warden take *very good care* of certain prisoners. Suki and Hakoda found themselves awaiting prisoner transfer. The Dragon of the West had taken a special interest in them, for reasons unknown to either her or her new friends. But when they glanced at the old man's portrait, it was nervously.

"We're going to break you out," Ty Lee whispered through the slit on Suki's cell, because in the day and a half since that hawk had come Suki hadn't been allowed out once. "We could start a riot and take Mai's uncle hostage and ride the gondola to freedom! Mai's already made a *ton* of shanks, and you and I don't even need weapons! We'll just *bam-bam* and—"

"How will we get off the island?" Suki asked, her back against the warm steel wall of her cell. She'd learned weeks ago that it was best to humor the girl (whose uniform was still pink, as if the guards had finally admitted defeat so long as she didn't ruin everyone *else's* clothes.)

"When they come for you they'll bring a balloon! Or a boat! We'll take it and ride to freedom! Mai and I will come with you, and we can bring along that old Chief guy so your boyfriend will be happy, and maybe we can go break out your Kyoshi warriors, and I'd *love* to see your home and, oh, wear one of those pretty dresses you're always talking about! I'm sure there's a resistance we can join and we'll be *best friends* even after we're out because all us non-bending girls have to stick together—"

"Sounds great, Ty Lee," Suki said, still humoring. Hoping was too dangerous.

The next morning, a war balloon landed outside the volcano.

Things began to go exactly as planned. This was a problem.

Chapter End Notes

The Boiling Rock episodes had so many little touches I appreciated, but pretty high up that list was the guard who saw Zuko suspiciously standing watch outside of a female prisoner's cell and was immediately like "I need to check in there right now." She was not having any of whatever that was. You are my hero, anonymous guard lady.

Chapter 21: Pardon Me

Chapter Notes

> I am super pregnant. Please forgive general update slowness in the coming months as I try not to physically or emotionally scar a fragile new lifeform. All of my stories are still active, but I'll be focusing primarily on Towards the Sun, Salvage, Little Zuko, and refilling the deep well of sleep deprivation that I'm warned is coming. <3

"These are my summer clothes, Zuko. You packed my summer clothes."

"It *is* summer!"

"Barely. Ugh, the pink coat? I thought I burned that. Ty Lee must have hidden it better than I'd thought."

"Can I turn around yet?"

"No. And if *I* turn around and your hair is still in that abominable state, you might force my hand."

Azula finished dressing in her own good time, in robes that passed as fashionable when worn by her, with the too-light weight of a mere *princess'* headpiece pinned into her topknot.

Zuko was in clean clothes, at least. A bit too informal, but passably presentable, and with his back still obediently turned. His hair in its atrocious low ponytail continued to defy her.

"Zuzu."

"I didn't bring a hairpiece. Wouldn't it look even weirder if I wore a topknot with no hairpiece?"

"You remembered to pack my crown, but not yours."

"...Yours was more important?"

Flatterer.

She would allow him his ponytail. For now. Besides; they were losing altitude fast, and the landing pad outside the Boiling Rock's caldera was in sight, with guards already waiting for them. There would be plenty of time for lighting her brother's hair on fire at a later date.

"This is a terrible idea." Zuko had the tone of an expert.

"It's been less than a day, Dum-Dum. Do you really think an isolated island prison is at the top of our dear uncle's list to inform of your," she rolled her wrist, "dramatic exit? Trust me, he's in no hurry to spread *that* news. But I guarantee the entire empire received the uplifting announcement of your impending coronation. We walk in, we walk out, and if anything goes wrong, I'll burn everyone who defies us."

This failed to soothe him. She hadn't intended it to.

%%%

The Warden waited at the foot of the gondola station, his armor polished to a regulation gleam, his highest officers arrayed behind him. Refreshments awaited in his office, and the Fire Lord's valued prisoners in their cells. This was not, after all, an unexpected visit.

The gondola came to a halt. Two former Fire Lords stepped off. With… no one else.

"Your Highnesses," he bowed. "I was not expecting the honor of your presence."

"Trust me, Warden," Princess Azula flashed her teeth, "I would be more concerned if you had been. Now. I would like to see my prisoners."

"Of course. Will your escort be joining us?" he asked, as if asking would make the gondolas begin moving again, and an escort appear. The princess *had* been prone to outpacing her guards, if not outright leaving them behind, in visits past. It did not seem appropriate for a prisoner transfer, however.

"I'm sure they'll catch up. The prisoners?"

"At once, your Highness. We have taken every precaution; as soon as the Fire Lord's message arrived, we separated them from the general population, and..."

The two royals exchanged a look. The Warden did not find it wise to speculate on its meaning. He also didn't find it wise to continue speaking over it.

"Zuzu," the princess asked, tilting her head to the side. "Is he taking us to them yet?"

"No," Prince Zuko said.

"Let me know when he is. And so help me if he offers *refreshments* first."

"...Right this way, your Highnesses." The Warden bowed again, and turned to lead them into the prison proper.

The prince began to follow. The princess did not. She stood examining her fingernails, a half-smile cut into her face.

"He, ah. He's taking us," Prince Zuko said.

"Thank you, Zuzu."

They began walking again. All of them, this time.

The prince—the *crown* prince—fell into step at the Warden's side, his sister a step behind. The boy was strangely thin, and strangely ill-dressed, and strangely forgoing his formal crown to wear his hair in some sort of peasant style instead. His thinness was the sort that some of the prisoners on their lowest levels had; a rather distasteful necessity in prison management, that, but when a Fire Lord orders someone locked away and forgotten, the Warden was quite adept at amnesia. As for the rest... perhaps it was a holdover from the boy's time away from court, or some new fashion in the capital. Such trends didn't generally reach them, here at the Boiling Rock. Not that 'emulating a colony refugee' was something the Warden would have encouraged among his staff.

For all that the prince looked like someone had dragged him out of a dark hole, the boy walked with a certain confidence. Casual curiosity, almost. Which was generally *not* the reaction most had upon viewing the Boiling Rock for the first time.

They passed from an imposing metal corridor into a walkway overlooking the prison yard below. All was sufficiently orderly; the first shift of prisoners was taking their exercise under the watchful eyes of his guards, their conversations—where such existed—hushed to reasonably cowed volumes. Others were about their chores. Those that saw the Warden and his party quickly ducked their heads, tucked their shoulders, and otherwise gave satisfactory impersonations of lizard-dogs at heel.

The prince paused to look down on them, and out at the prison at large.

"This is nice," he said. "Warm. Sunny."

"Lakeview," the princess added, and both royals laughed. One of the Warden's guards shifted uneasily at the sound. The Warden noted this for future reprimand.

The princess herself was looking significantly better than certain rumors to the contrary. She was also staring directly back at him.

"You," she said, "are wondering why I'm here. Did you really think my own uncle would keep me locked away?"

"Of course not, your Highness."

"How *is* Mai? Comfortable?"

"Azula," the prince warned.

"...This way, your Highnesses."

They followed him, and peered through the slits of the holding cells like they were at the Caldera Zoo. At the first, the princess made a dismissive noise.

"It's the Water Tribe Chief," the prince explained. "...I think."

"Chief Hakoda," the Warden supplied.

Not that the princess was listening; she was already peering into the next cell, her lips curling into a smile.

"Ah, my favorite prisoner. Perfect." She waved a hand over her shoulder. "Do your thing, Zuzu. I'll just be in here."

"Azula."

"Better be quick," she said.

The prince let out a breath. And turned to the Warden. "I, uh. I'd like to see Mai and Ty Lee. They're being pardoned. So... we're going to leave with them."

"Of course, your Highness. Do you have their release papers?"

"I didn't need papers to put them in here," the princess said. "I don't see why we'd need any to take them out. If you're so worried about it, send a hawk to Uncle Fire Lord. We'll wait."

The princess was not one to be kept waiting.

"...I'll send for them, Your Highnesses."

The Warden had not gained his position by questioning royal orders.

%%%

Azula was here. Mai hadn't seen her, but half the prison had; strolling over the walkway above, her crown restored.

Zuko was here, too. Maybe. People weren't as sure on that one, because even if he'd fallen from grace under Fire Lord Iroh's reign, no one started looking like a famine victim *that* fast. His royal portrait had made him look young and strong; not like this. But he had the prince's scar, didn't he?

He hadn't been wearing a crown.

Mai had thought Fire Lord Iroh would still favor him. They'd seemed close. And then Zuko had abandoned the old man in Ba Sing Se, so maybe that had been the end of that. Azula was the objectively better candidate for heir if Iroh was trying to bring Ozai's faction back into the fold. And apparently he'd deposed his nephew, so it really shouldn't be a surprise that those rumors of a coronation ceremony had gotten *prince* confused with *princess.*

It certainly wasn't a surprise when the guards came to collect her. Mai fell into step between them; no need to make this a bigger production than it already was.

Ty Lee had her own guards. They met in a hallway on the way to wherever they were both being taken. Ty Lee flashed a bright smile. Mai returned a bored nod.

They were brought to the Warden's office. Inside was Zuko, sitting on the corner of her uncle's desk with his foot propped up on a chair, picking at a tray of refreshments like fruit was a novelty to him.

"You're dismissed," he said.

The guards shifted uncomfortably. "It's policy to keep the prisoners guarded during interrogations—"

"They're being pardoned. Not interrogated. Guard from *outside."*

"...Yes, your Highness."

They closed the door behind them. Mai and Ty Lee looked at Zuko. He looked back.

"...Kiwi-grape?" he offered, holding out a bowl.

Ty Lee accepted one of the fruits, with a "Thanks!"

"Nice of you to finally visit, Zuko," Mai said.

"I didn't… know you were here?"

"Did you *ask?"*

Briefly, very briefly, a flash of that familiar glare broke through whatever *this* weirdly relaxed mask was. "I was—I was *trying,* okay? There were just too many things, and there were more everyday, and I didn't *know* you were in prison. I thought she'd just banished you like everyone else."

Mai crossed her arms. "Only banished. That's great."

He closed his eyes. Took in a deep breath, and let it out. Ty Lee took another kiwi-grape.

"So." His eyes flicked to the door, and the shadows of the guard's feet underneath. "You're being pardoned."

"On whose orders?" Mai asked, because Zuko really *wasn't* wearing his crown, and they were not going back to working for Azula. Not for longer than it took to run away.

"Mine? Iroh named me the crown prince."

Iroh. Not 'Fire Lord Iroh'. Not 'Uncle'. Mai narrowed her eyes.

"Great!" Ty Lee said. "Can you pardon our friend, too?"

"That's, uh. That's not a great idea. Our war balloon isn't very big, and it's a long flight to… Caldera."

"That's too bad." Ty Lee smiled. "We *really* want her to leave with us."

Once they left the Boiling Rock, once they betrayed Azula *again,* they weren't getting back in here. Traitors to the crown couldn't just walk in and take people from the Fire Nation's most secure prison. If they were getting Suki out, they were doing it now.

"Where's Azula?" Mai asked.

"With a prisoner."

"Her 'favorite' prisoner?"

"...Yes?"

"That's *really* too bad," Ty Lee said. She popped one last kiwi-grape into her mouth, and wiped off her hands on her pink prison pants.

%%%

Azula was in the middle of a refreshing bout of minor psychological torture when the cell door opened. It was her two traitors, plus her brother.

"Really?" she sighed. "Without even knocking?"

Mai pressed a sharpened piece of metal to Zuzu's neck. "Step away from her," she said, more to the guards than Azula. An accurate assessment of how much Azula cared about threats to her brother's safety. It was Mai's hand on the knife, but the Dum-Dum had clearly done this to himself.

Meanwhile, Ty Lee was relieving a guard of his keys to the prisoner's shackles.

Mai's gaze stayed on Azula. Azula's stayed on her brother.

"Zuzu. How exactly does one screw up a *pardon?"*

"They wanted to bring their friend. I said no."

"And?"

"...Now I'm their hostage," he said. "So they can escape."

She couldn't help the little laugh that cut its way out of her throat, or her glass-edged smile.

"So the traitors betrayed you. What have we learned about trust, Zuko?"

He shrugged, in that maddening way that implied he didn't *care.* "It's still the right thing to do."

"You're not stopping us," Mai said, like a squawking shrike-viper was any part of this conversation.

"On the bright side," her brother said, "we definitely don't need paperwork now."

Neither traitors nor guards nor the prisoner rubbing her unshackled wrists seemed reassured by the sibling laughter that followed.

%%%

"A ship just docked, sir," reported the guard, after a perfectly executed bow. "Royal guard."

It appeared their Highnesses' escort had caught up.

The Warden nodded his dismissal, and spent a few more minutes in the yard, appreciating the tired misery of a well-run prison. It, like all final moments of happiness, went largely unremarked.

This was when the escape alarms went off.

Chapter 22: Everyone Is Escaping

Chapter Notes

> Life updates: Mini-Muffin is one year old and Salvage is complete and I wrote this chapter WHILE THE IN-LAWS WERE VISITING, so you can believe me when I say that we are BACK, baby. Going to focus on this story until at least the end of the Boiling Rock Arc. <3

A conversation between Sokka and Toph, circa that morning:

"I just have this feeling that everything is about to go wrong."

"You had that yesterday, Ambassador Snoozles."

"And everything *did.* Or were you at a different coronation-turned-civil-war-declaration than I was?"

"Go get your dad, Sokka. And your non-moon girlfriend."

So now here Sokka was, stepping off a royal cruiser into the shadow of the Boiling Rock's caldera.

"This way, Ambassador," Captain Izumi said, as if there were more than one way up from the docks. He wondered if she knew his name, or if in her head she was finishing every *Ambassador* with *Snoozles.*

Sokka wanted Katara here at his side, but there'd already been some *scuffles* in the capital between people who supported Iroh and people who didn't, and she was out helping to heal bruises and tempers. Showing them that Team Avatar was about more than ripping their

firebendy-souls out of their still-living bodies and usurping their hereditary monarchs (twice). Katara was pretty good at the whole rallying-people-to-the-side-of-good thing, and Toph was with her in case things rallied the *other* way, and Iroh was meeting with his nobles and generals in his own rallying way with Aang by his side being twelve and goofy and hopefully less terrifying than rumors alleged.

Damage control, in other words.

So Sokka was here alone. Just a quick in-and-out to pick up his dad and Suki, then back to the palace. He had the current Fire Lord's full support, and a team of royal guards Iroh trusted, and there was no reason to think that anything was about to go terribly horribly wrong.

The bad feeling had not gone away. Scientifically speaking, it was already one for one.

%%%

Hakoda's new cell left nothing to the imagination. It was only him, his handcuffs, and a chair bolted to the floor. It wasn't a room you held someone in for long; wasn't a room that cared where its resident was going next, or if they were comfortable on their way.

The light through the keyhole was blotted out; the knob turned; the hinges did *not* creak. Hakoda knew more about the Warden's obsessive maintenance schedule than he'd ever desired. He stood, tense and readied for whatever came. He didn't have a bad feeling about this. He didn't need to: nothing good would come for him when that door opened.

It opened on Suki, spinning a guard's key ring around her finger.

"Jailbreak," she said, and her smirk told him everything he needed to know about how fast and deep his son would have fallen for this girl.

Outside the cell, he felt old. Four other teenagers waited for him with varying degrees of indifference; five, with Suki. It was entirely clear that getting him out had been her idea, and only her idea.

"Is it really a jailbreak if you're all being pardoned?" a girl he recognized from her royal portraits stated more than asked. Her Former Majesty Azula, short had she reigned, stood slightly apart from the group.

Hakoda swept his eyes over the rest of the children, then raised an eyebrow at her. "Pardoned at knife point?"

The Fire Princess scoffed. The boy at knife point shrugged.

His Former Majesty Zuko was neither as regal nor as well fed as his own portraits had implied. The royal painter had clearly left out a few circumstances. Whatever they were, they'd done nothing to convince the boy that he was a mere mortal like the rest of them; even with Mai's blade to his throat, he seemed blithely unconcerned for his safety. Hakoda was, as always, unimpressed by the Fire Nation royal family.

"Let's get going," Suki said, "before any guards show up."

Which was, of course, when the guards showed up.

%%%

There was a war balloon on the upper landing. A little one, looking a lot like the kind Sokka had helped the Mechanist design, but with just enough visible differences to make Sokka veer towards it—

Captain Izumi didn't say anything. She just stopped walking and stood there, like a particularly animate pillar, exhibiting the same scathingly professional air with which she always handled Team Avatar. At least she'd been acting like this since the beginning; it was

the people who'd started after the Agni Kai—or worse, after yesterday's little *speech* —that worried Sokka.

Worried him the most, anyway. Anyone who'd dedicated their lives to serving Ozai worried Sokka rather a lot on principle, and no, Iroh's insistence that the royal guard was sworn to *the* Fire Lord, not *a* Fire Lord, didn't help. It sure hadn't helped Zuko.

Captain Izumi kept up her pointedly polite waiting. Sokka un-veered, away from one of the last remaining war balloons, the only one he'd been in range of putting his hands on *without* being in the middle of a life-and-death battle in a flame-soaked sky.

One of their guards was exchanging pleasantries and paperwork with the guards up here. The prison guard looked things over and then flashed a signal fire over his head, staccato flares of flame from an upraised palm. Someone across the big scary lake signaled back, and the heavy steel cables began to move.

So consolation prize: free gondola ride.

Besides, he could poke at the war balloon on their way out. His dad would like that.

%%%

"He owes me—" the voice of one guard said, as they rounded a corner into the dead end corridor in which the holding cells lay.

"You are never getting that money back," the other said. "I don't know why you think you are ever getting that money back."

"But it's payday and he *owes* me—"

And then they were fully in the corridor, fully in view, and both guardswomen stopped. Mai tightened her grip on the knife.

"Hi," Zuko said, with a little wave. "I'm a hostage."

One of the guards lunged. Not for them, but for the wall; specifically, for the prison-wide alarm on the wall. Those were placed at quite regular intervals. Azula had always been tempted to pull one, but perfect princesses did not give in to such urges.

Suki moved to intercept, and the guard's outstretched arm quickly became the pivot point that sent her arcing into the floor. Ty Lee followed in Suki's shadow, and the second guard's hand went limp before she could more than half-way draw her sword.

The prison alarm blared, loud and insistent and all around them. Guards and escapees alike turned to Azula.

She shrugged, and took her hand off the switch.

That had been exactly as satisfying as she'd always imagined.

%%%

"What's that noise?" Sokka asked, squishing his face against the gondola's window, because Captain Izumi had made him close it, because for some reason she'd taken one look at him leaning out to stare at the boiling sulfuric lake of death far below and slid it shut almost on his nose. And latched it. And stood in front of the latch.

"Prison alarm," she said, telling him nothing he couldn't already infer. Because prison. And alarm.

She made some rapid hand signals, and the royal guard fell into a protective circle around him. Sokka was no longer allowed a window view. Or much of a view at all, besides the backs of his overly tall guards. Adults, and their desire to make decisions for him, continued to be awful.

The gondola continued its downward descent, which felt like a metaphor for this situation.

%%%

Hakoda took the rear guard as they ran. He would have preferred point, because he was the *adult* here, but Suki and Ty Lee were already ruthlessly filling the position and hadn't bothered to consult him. It wasn't as if rear guard were less dangerous; he held the sword he'd stolen from those first guards ready as they came across more.

It always took the guards a moment to realize the situation, despite the Fire Prince's… helpful contributions.

"I'm a hostage," the boy waved again. "Would you mind stepping into that cell there, so they don't kill me? Thanks. Uh, have a nice day."

"I'm not related to you," the Fire Princess said, after one such encounter. No one was holding a knife to her throat, but the threat against her brother was apparently enough to keep her in line. Perhaps there was *some* hope for their family.

"You pulled the *big red switch,"* the boy shot back, seemingly more offended by her words than by being dragged around by his neck.

"Someone was going to," the girl sniffed. "Don't I deserve nice things, Zuzu?"

Hakoda had long wondered if there was insanity in the line of Sozin. This was not how he'd expected to gain confirmation.

They broke out onto one of the open walkways overlooking the prison yard, with a clear view of their target.

"Gondola ahead," Suki said, never losing her focus. "It's touching down. We can do this."

With two royal hostages, they could do a lot more than a prison break. But first they had to make it out.

%%%

The Warden met the gondola at the landing, after having run faster than he had in twenty years. The Boiling Rock did not, as a general rule, inspire its inhabitants to *sprint.*

Their Highnesses' guard was disembarking, well aware that a gondola could become a firetrap if the enemy numbers held firebenders. They were led by none other than Captain Izumi herself. This boded well for how her people would handle themselves, and poorly for the Warden's chances of keeping this incident off any official reports. Worse: the way the guard had formed up around a figure in their center indicated a *third* VIP suddenly in their midst. For a moment, he was filled with cold dread that it was Fire Lord Iroh himself, who *else* would have accompanied the prince and princess, but the figure ensconced by the guards was too small for that.

"Hey! Let me see!"

Too young, as well. His guards ignored him, and the Warden followed suit.

"Warden," the Captain said, "report."

"A mere escape attempt," he said, forcing his tone to the expected levels of disdain. "Never fear, today will *not* be the day my perfect record breaks. Their Highnesses will be perfectly

safe—"

"What?" she snapped.

"They're coming!" a guard shouted.

The time for posturing before his peers was later. For now, he turned to the guardsman on the controls.

"I want those gondolas parked at the midpoint and the controls locked. The rest of you, form up. No one escapes the Boiling Rock."

%%%

The guards they'd encountered on their way here had been spotty, startled; they'd been the people in their path already when the alarm had been pulled. What they met on the gondola landing was organized ranks of resistance between them and their target. Their target, which was even now headed back over the lake. Why send guards into the prison after them, when the only place that mattered was right here?

"We have your prince and princess," Hakoda said, breaking the silence of the standoff. "If you care anything for them, you will stand aside."

A woman with silvered hair took one step forward. "You're under arrest, by order of Fire Lord Iroh," she said, and it took Hakoda's mind a long moment to process the words she'd spoken first.

"Prince Zuko. Princess Azula. You're under arrest, by order of Fire Lord Iroh."

Hakoda watched the value of their hostages plummet, much like his hopes for the situation.

%%%

Sokka couldn't see much past his stiflingly protective guards, couldn't push his way past their stupid pointed armor, but he *knew* that voice—

"Dad!" he shouted.

But his father and his non-moon girlfriend and a whole lot of people he didn't expect to find either *here* or *with them* were retreating back into the prison, down a narrow hall they could defend rather than the open landing where more and more guards were arriving.

"Dad!" Sokka shouted again.

But the alarm was blaring and guards were shouting and Azula was cackling, and his father had more important voices to listen for than one he'd never expected to hear at the Boiling Rock.

Chapter 23: New Plan

"They aren't coming," Hakoda said, peering around the corner to the eerily empty hall beyond.

"Oh, they are," Azula said. "They're just securing everything useful, first. The gondolas, the armory, the food supplies… The Warden has *quite* the procedural checklist for escapes. Trust me; I had to sit through his last annual report."

"You act like this doesn't affect you," Hakoda said.

The girl shrugged. "I can't see how it does."

"That guard just said you were under arrest," Suki said. "That doesn't affect you?"

"Don't believe everything people say about me," Azula said, waving a hand. "I certainly don't. They can *say* I'm under arrest all they want."

The Fire Prince snorted. Mai prodded him in the chest with a shank, in the same way another girl might have poked him with a finger.

"Is there something you forgot to tell us?" she asked.

"Not… forgot," the boy answered.

"You said we were pardoned," Ty Lee said.

"Well I couldn't tell you that I was breaking you out," he said. "There were guards right outside the door."

"Why did you *need* to break us out?" Mai asked. "You're a prince. We heard you were the *crown* prince."

"You probably heard I was the Fire Lord, too," the boy said, with his own shrug.

Clunk, said the pipes overhead. Their whole group looked up.

"So that's what it sounds like when they shut off the water main," Azula said. "I wonder how long it will take for the rest of the prisoners to turn on us. The record is twelve hours, I believe."

"Maybe they'll send in tea," her brother said, and they both laughed.

Hakoda had enough of Ozai's children acting as if there was no danger here for them. Even if they'd run away from the palace on a lark, or as some act of teenage rebellion; even if the guards really *were* no threat to them, they still had *him.*

A step forward, an arm to the throat of Ozai's son, and Hakoda was feeling much better about this war.

"If you're not going to be useful to us," he said, "tell me why I should leave the Fire Lord his heir."

It wasn't really a question. A question would have implied a correct answer. Hakoda was expecting something—for the boy's facade to crack, for him to bluster or beg. For him to show what sort of man he really was.

He was not expecting the shank pressed to his side.

"Excuse you," Mai said, her monotone frigid. "That's my boyfriend."

Suki set a hand on Hakoda's bicep; he allowed himself to be pulled away. The Fire Prince rubbed his throat where Hakoda's arm had been. Where Mai's knife had been, before.

"Funny way you have of showing your affection," Hakoda said.

"He tried to break up with me," Mai said, "in a *letter."*

"Yeah, um," the prince said. "Sorry about that. I didn't want you to be in danger—"

A knife lodged into the wall next to his head. The boy blinked, but didn't flinch.

"I do not need you to decide what's too dangerous for me," Mai said. "Especially not when it was too dangerous for *you."*

"It wouldn't have been if my plan had worked."

"And did it?" she pressed. *"Did* your plan work?"

"A letter, Dum-Dum?" his sister asked. "Really?"

"It wasn't even that good of a letter," Ty Lee confided.

"It's not like I've ever written a breakup letter before! I'll do better next time!"

Another knife joined the first in the wall, on the opposite side of his head.

Hakoda wondered if he'd understand any of this better, if he'd raised his own children to teenhood.

"It's not my fault no one ever needs me to rescue them!" the Fire Prince's facade *had* cracked. Behind it was more shouting and gesticulating than Hakoda had expected. He looked uncomfortably like the youngest on Hakoda's crew, shouting over being forced to do laundry again. "Did *your* plan work? What even *was* your plan before we got here?"

Ty Lee set her hands on her hips. "You don't get to break up with her and then *shout* at her. And besides, we're all really strong, so the plan was to trust each other."

"That was not a plan," Azula said. "And a terrible one, at that."

"We couldn't let them take Suki," Ty Lee said.

"Or Hakoda," Suki added. Hakoda appreciated the effort, even though none of the other teens echoed her.

The Fire Prince cleared his throat. "Actually, I think your friend and the chief are both pardoned. Or at least, the Fire Lord wants to meet them. And Unc— Iroh is working with the Avatar, and he has Southern Water Tribe friends, so the Chief is probably actually safe. I'm not sure how the Avatar's group feels about Kyoshi Island, though, they left it behind even though it was on fire—"

"It was on fire because of *you!"* Suki said. "They left to draw you off!"

"And hosting the Avatar *wasn't* a break in your little island-state's vaunted neutrality?" Azula asked.

Hakoda rubbed his temples. "I think their Highnesses have some explaining to do. We need to understand the situation before we form a plan."

He was not going to comment on the quality of the girls' previous plan, because he was not going to publicly agree with Fire Nation royalty.

The Fire Nation children both looked to Azula to speak. Azula smiled and magnanimously waved for her brother to do so, instead. He looked briefly panicked before slipping back into that uncaring confidence of his.

His confidence did not match his speaking abilities. Regardless, the jist was this:

Hakoda and Suki were likely pardoned thanks to the Avatar's intervention, while Mai and Ty Lee were not.

Mai and Ty Lee had been *told* they were pardoned, while Hakoda and Suki had not been.

Mai and Ty Lee and Zuko and Azula would be under arrest if caught, while Hakoda and Suki would be brought before the Fire Lord as honored guests.

No one here wanted to be either arrested *or* an honored guest of the Fire Lord.

"Great! We can all work together," Ty Lee said, optimistically.

"Why *aren't* you the crown prince?" Mai asked, narrowing her eyes at her former boyfriend.

"I abdicated."

"And your uncle didn't take no for an answer?"

"I, uh. Might have done it during the crowning ceremony."

"He told the entire court and all the little mice that he was visiting sick relatives," Azula said.

"You did what," Mai said.

"Wow," said Ty Lee. "In front of *everyone?* That was really brave."

"Thanks?" the Fire Prince said.

"What, is that code for running away?" Suki asked.

"So the Fire Lord doesn't kill you, I'd assume," Hakoda said. He'd never heard the phrase before, but it wasn't hard to figure out. If it was a phrase everyone at court seemingly knew, then there were few things it could be.

"It's… what?" the Fire Prince said, and his sister broke down laughing.

Mai ran a hand down her face. "Zuko. Did you start a civil war?"

"What? No. That's— Did I? Azula—!"

Azula had her arms wrapped around her stomach. If she weren't leaning against the wall, she'd be on the floor laughing.

"I just wanted to step down!" the prince shouted.

The Fire Princess straightened, her laughter flipping off like a switch. She grinned at Hakoda with barracuda-seal teeth.

"I believe," she said, "you asked for a reason not to kill my brother. There's your answer. As long as my dear, *sincere* brother is alive and free, we'll tear ourselves apart. Doesn't a divided Fire Nation sound *wonderful?"*

"No!" her brother shouted. "No, it doesn't!"

"All that political maneuvering and bloodshed turned inwards, our armies marching against each other…" Azula crooned.

"Yes," Suki said, "it does."

Hakoda was, against his earlier sentiments, forced to agree with Fire Nation royalty.

Chapter 24: Sokka Feels Very Safe

To leave, they needed the gondola. To use the gondola, they needed to take the landing, and *hold* it. To take the landing, they needed more people.

"Alternatively," the Fire Princess began.

"We are *not* killing everyone," the Fire Prince said.

"Fine, fine," she said, waving a dismissive hand. "Continue with your Plan B."

...They needed more people.

"We can't be the only ones who want to escape," Hakoda said. "If we could rally the others, or start a riot…"

"I know a guy," Suki said.

%%%

There were guards on the walkways, bellowing down to the prison yard below. This was applicable to Sokka in that he needed to time his own shouting in-between theirs.

"He's my *dad."*

"CLEAR THE YARD."

"No one's told him what's happening, there's no way he'd..."

"RETURN TO YOUR CELLS."

"...side with *Zuko* and *Azula* if he…"

"ANY INMATE FOUND OUT OF THEIR ASSIGNED CELL WILL GET THE COOLER."

"...knew I was here to get him. Who tries a prison break when they've already been *pardoned?* I... "

"CLEAR THE YARD."

"...just need to talk to…"

"RETURN TO YOUR CELLS."

"...him. You've got to let me..."

"ANY INMATE…"

Yeah yeah yeah. What even was a cooler? Didn't sound like much of a punishment, not in this heat. Part of his brain cared about that. The rest really, really didn't.

"Let me *talk* to him. And Suki. Maybe even Zuko will listen; I seriously doubt that guy knows what he started."

Captain Izumi remained unimpressed.

"My orders are to keep you safe, Ambassador," she repeated. "Princess Azula shoots lightning; the only protection we have against that is keeping you *away* from her."

"Or we could take Zuko hostage," Sokka said. "He's good at redirecting that stuff."

As a culture, the Southern Water Tribe had figured out negatives later than some. They didn't elaborately tally their neighbor's debts like the Earth Kingdom. They hadn't had Captain Izumi, either. Her professionalism was unimpeachable, but it was rapidly going subzero in its expression.

"I'm just saying," Sokka said, "it's not like getting taken hostage again is going to ruin his day at this point. But fine, we'll call that Plan B. So back to Plan A: letting me talk to my dad."

Another guard—one of Izumi's—approached them, while the prison guards bellowed on.

"The Warden has offered his office, Captain. ...Apparently there are refreshments inside."

Captain Izumi nodded. And then Sokka was hemmed in by her whole squad, who were moving towards the Warden's office, so now Sokka was too. Life was a lot easier when 'physical harm' was an option for dealing with Fire Nation guards who disagreed with him.

"We'll clear this block ourselves," Captain Izumi said to her people, and now Sokka was trying to talk over *her* instead of the shouty prison yard guys.

"The Fire Lord is not going to be happy with this," he said.

"The Ambassador stays inside the Warden's office. Two guards on the door."

"You were ordered to bring my dad and Suki back safely, too."

"Another two at this junction. I'll—"

"Would you *LISTEN?"*

The Captain stopped. Looked down at him.

"My orders," Captain Izumi said, "are to keep you safe."

And then he was being herded into an office, and bracing himself in the doorway only kept him out for so long. He popped inside like a guard-assisted cork.

There was a desk, atop which was a lightly picked-over platter of food. There were gray steel filing cabinets sweltering in the light through the barred window, the prison records reflecting in miniature what was being done to the people catalogued in them.

There was, also, a leg sticking out from behind the desk.

"Wow," Sokka said. "I feel very safe in here."

"That does explain what happened to Prince Zuko's guards," the captain said, in a mutter he wasn't sure he was supposed to hear, and which contained at least ten percent more personality than he was used to from her.

"Alive, sir," one of her guards reported, after a quick check. "Chi-blocked and gagged."

The leg twitched. Just a little.

Sokka looked at the captain. The captain looked at Sokka.

"My dad and Suki *don't know what's happening.* They're going to fight you. If you think I'm going to stay in here while the Fire Nation hurts them *again,* when they should be safe, then *I'll* fight you, too."

Space sword was lost. But he had *a* sword with him. And boomerang. And his patented Sokka wits.

Captain Izumi pinched the bridge of her nose. "I will assess the situation. *If* I deem it safe, *then* you may attempt to speak with them. From a distance. With guards. At my signal, and no earlier."

Sokka nodded very easily to these terms that brought him closer to within shouting range of his dad.

Chapter 25: Suki Knows a Guy

"...FOUND OUT OF THEIR ASSIGNED CELL WILL GET THE COOLER," a guard was shouting outside, muffled through the walls of the cell block. Zuko focused on the voice, because it was either that or think about how he'd *started a civil war* and if he thought too hard about *that* then—

"Breathe, Dum-Dum," Azula said.

So Zuko didn't. Think. He just breathed as the hot humid air pressed in on him from all sides like a blanket, listened to the guards shouting but not at him, felt as Mai stepped up next to him and her sleeve brushed against his. She wasn't saying anything, which was good, because it was words that had gotten him into this in the first place.

Azula, on his other side, scoffed regally and turned her gaze away.

Suki was leading them through the rush of prisoners. She clearly knew where she was going; all he had to do was follow and watch each moment moving by without skipping any. And breathe. Between Azula's crown and Zuko's face, they were being given a fair amount of breathing room.

There was shouting from the ground floor. This part of the prison was a square, open in the center with cells lining its walls above and below. The last prisoners still out in the yard were stumbling in, herded by the firewhips of guards who had no more patience. There were two types of prisoners: those who were tucking themselves back into their cells, and those who weren't.

"Chit Sang," Suki called, to one of the latter. "We need a riot."

The man was standing with two others, a man and a woman. He was taller than Hakoda by the same amount that Hakoda was taller than the rest of them.

"You already have one." Chit Sang crossed his arms. His biceps were approximately the same size as Zuko's head. It was the kind of detail that was easy to focus on.

"Yeah, but we need it at the landing. We take that, we take the gondolas, we leave."

"Are you joking?" the woman with him said. "They're already starting the crackdown."

"BACK IN YOUR CELLS," a guard below shouted. The prisoners in the first floor were falling in line, pressing themselves back into their cells as the guards systematically locked them in.

"Can't your new friends just pardon us?" Chit Sang asked, with a jut of his chin towards Zuko and Azula.

"They're useless," Suki said.

"Huh," said Azula, like someone newly applying the term to herself.

"Yeah," shrugged Zuko, a veteran.

"How many years is your sentence, Chit Sang? What about your girl's, or your best buddy's?" Suki asked. "Do they *have* an end? I know mine didn't. We know there's a transport ship parked at the docks right now, since they came here to pick up prisoners. Everyone is already riled up. And we have two targets they want more than the rest of us. This is as good a setup as you're ever going to get. You want in?"

Someone threw the contents of a mop bucket down on the guards below, followed by the mop itself.

"Do you want in," Chit Sang corrected, and: *"Yes.* Hey, everyone! Breakout!"

More than mops followed.

%%%

The 27th Revision of the Boiling Rock's Escape Attempt Contingency Plan, as presented for the pleasure of His Majesty, Fire Lord Ozai, as heard by Princess Azula, who should have learned from Zuzu that nothing good ever came from asking to attend meetings, even if her penalty had only been boredom:

The first and second steps: containment of escape means and resources. Without the gondolas, there was no escape. Without supplies, prisoners could not hold any ground they took.

%%%

The gondolas shuddered to a halt, far above the boiling lake below.

The Warden took the key from their operator and tucked it around his own neck. He then placed himself in the densest grouping of his best guards; his safety was, of course, a matter of prison security.

"All high-priority targets secured, sir," a prison guard said, bowing to the Warden.

"Good," he said, and did not even think to bow back.

%%%

Step three: containment of movement. Guards will move block by block, starting from the guard's wing and moving outward, locking the steel gates between prison sections.

"It would take even a skilled firebender hours to melt their way through," the Warden had boasted.

"Really," Azula had said, one hand propping up her cheek, the other rolling blue fire above her fingers.

"Your Highness' illustrious flames excepted, of course," the Warden said, suddenly sweating more than the room's fires would account for.

%%%

"How long will this take you?" Hakoda asked.

"Longer if I must waste breath answering *you,"* Azula snapped. The steel bars glowed a steady, solid, immutable red, mocking her, defying her—

"Azula?" Ty Lee said.

"What?"

Ty Lee pointed to Suki. Suki held up the keys they'd taken off their guards, back at the start of this.

Azula graciously stepped away from the door.

"I could have done it," she said. "This is hardly even saving time."

"I'm sure you could have," Ty Lee said.

%%%

Step four: containment of prisoners. With the population fragmented and demoralized, returning them to their cells and targeting the perpetrators for punishment would be easily accomplished.

%%%

"Sir, they..."

"What?" the Warden snapped.

"They have keys."

...The Warden was going to have to revise his plan. Again.

%%%

The guards tried to set up choke points.

The guards had never trained against smiling ex-circus acrobats who could down them with a touch, or someone bored enough to file every spoon she'd encountered in this place into a knife. Those still standing after those two had gone past had the *rest* of the prisoners to contend with.

Not everyone was escaping with them. Most weren't; most had been here too short a time to risk fighting back, or too long. But they had enough people to overwhelm the first choke

point. And the second.

At the third, every Fire Nation citizen visibly stalled, even as Suki and Hakoda had stepped forward for another attack.

They were the only ones who didn't recognize the armor of the royal guard.

Chapter 26: Prison Air Is Good for the Health

It was said that the first of the Royal Guards were chosen by Agni himself; sparks scattered from the very fire with which the first Fire Lord's flame had been kindled.

It was documented in the palace's archives that, Agni's direct benediction no longer forthcoming, the earliest Fire Lords had a simple test for those joining their personal guard: lasting a minute in combat against Their Majesty.

Modern Fire Lords no longer deigned to personally test each of their guards (modern Fire Lords presided over a *nation,* with a staff size to match, rather than a local clan; modern archival clerks knew better than to point out that "Fire Lord" used to be a title held by many, rather than by one).

Regardless, the standard of combat prowess remained. The hesitance among the prisoners at the sight of those uniforms was palpable.

"There is a simple solution to this," Azula said.

"No murder," said her brother.

And so Azula, with a roll of her eyes, let this keep playing out.

(This hallucination was overly detailed, anyway; murder here would be such a mess. Murder by firebending even more so; it always smelled like a freshly swept Agni Kai field, like smiling while her brother burned because mother had tried to teach her how it was appropriate for a little girl to put her emotions on her face but mother had never covered *this,* and anyway Zuko had it coming, and father could turn to check her reaction at any time—)

No, it didn't hurt to indulge her brother in this little dream. He could have as little or as much murder as he wanted.

%%%

One of the guards stepped forward from the rest; a silver-haired woman, with the extra ornamentation on her armor that marked an officer, though Hakoda didn't know this uniform, or what rank it signaled.

"I am Captain Izumi of the Royal Guard," she said. "May I speak to Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe and Suki of the Kyoshi Warriors?"

"Speak, then," Hakoda said, after a pause.

"It is the Fire Lord's intention to pardon you, if you come with us," the captain said.

"We've heard." Suki was tense at his side.

The captain's gaze shifted to her, then settled back on Hakoda. "It's your son's hope that you will."

Before he could process that threat, work through the sudden chill of them having his *son,* of the sense-memory of their last hug at the invasion and his growing confidence, his hope, as each new prison he was brought to did *not* contain a precocious Water Tribe genius, that the children really had escaped; before the shock of failure could settle on him, there was shouting from down the hall and across the yard.

"Dad! Suki!"

The captain let out a small breath, slow and deliberate, that Hakoda could almost have mistaken for a sigh. She gestured her people back; back far enough that, if he wanted, he could step forward enough to reach the opening in this hallway that overlooked the prison yard, and the walkway opposite them.

His son was there. Flanked by two guards who were failing to contain his flailing arms.

Not flailing: waving.

"Sokka?" asked Suki.

"Fire Lord Iroh is the Avatar's firebending teacher," the captain said, after another of those measured exhalations. "His Majesty brought with him to the palace his… Water Tribe ambassadors."

"It's safe!" Sokka yelled, jumping up and down as if this would aid his point. "Not a trap! I'm definitely not a hostage! Which is exactly what a hostage would say…"

His shouting dropped off into muttering as he stopped his jumping and rubbed at his chin. Hakoda and the guard captain stood in relative silence until Sokka snapped his fingers—inaudible at this distance—and raised his voice again.

"Would a hostage tell you that when he was seven, the one who broke your favorite spear and hid it in the snowbank until spring was him, not Aput's polar dog? I think not! So you can definitely trust the nice fire lady! Wait, not the Fire Lady, that would be Zuko's mom; where even is she, do we have to fight her too…"

The inaudible chin-rubbing mutterings began anew.

"He's in lightning range," the princess said, quite off-handedly. Hakoda tensed.

"Still no murder," the prince replied.

"I suppose there's already been enough of that, on mother's account."

The Fire Prince did not laugh, for once.

It was hard to tell from a distance, but Sokka seemed… healthy. He was dressed in Water Tribe colors, and the guards that flanked him seemed more concerned for how their captain across the way would react than the boy between them. Sokka turned slightly, and Hakoda could make out the sheath of a Fire Nation-style sword and his boomerang.

His son was here, and healthy, and armed.

Hakoda eyed the captain. She met his gaze with a certain weary professionalism.

"Your son has asked that you be escorted to safety," she said.

"And the other prisoners?" Suki asked, because they were very much not alone in this hallway. Said other prisoners were doing their own muttering; some quietly slipping away, some steeling themselves for the outcome of this interaction.

Ty Lee and Mai were watching Suki.

"I am not," the captain said, her next words carrying just the faintest trace of distaste, *"breaking out* anyone the Fire Lord has not already approved."

"That's going to be a problem," Suki said. Even as she spoke, her stance settled back into something more combat ready.

Or it did, until Ty Lee poked her in the ribs. Not one of the girl's disquieting paralyzing jabs; a normal poke, between friends.

"You should go."

"You wouldn't have left without me," Suki said.

Mai sighed, far more dramatically than the guard captain. "You're the one we wanted to get out. Now get out."

Something passed between the three girls, in the silence that followed. Suki slowly eased out of her stance.

"Should I tell the Fire Lord about you?" she asked.

"Would it help?" Mai asked, in her usual monotone. The question on all their minds.

The girls hugged; Ty Lee and Suki fiercely, Mai simply allowing it. And then Hakoda and Suki stepped towards the *nice fire lady,* and if Hakoda had any lingering doubts about his son's not-a-hostage-status, the happy whoop from across the yard settled them. The rest of his doubts would have to wait until he met this new Fire Lord.

The guard captain hesitated, looking behind them. Her gaze flicked to the princess, but it was to the prince she spoke.

"Your Highness. The Fire Lord wants you back safely, as well. He's concerned for your health."

%%%

'Concern for his health' had gotten them here, via the Agni Kai field. Concern for *Azula's* health had gotten her a room in a mental institution. Zuko met Captain Izumi's gaze, and shrugged.

This was not the answer she was looking for.

"Please surrender, your Highness."

Yeah. Iroh had asked that, too.

"You weren't at my coronation," he said, only just realizing it. She hadn't been part of his guard rotation after the Agni Kai. She'd probably put herself on Iroh's, instead: the captain of the guard belonged with the Fire Lord, not a prince. He'd last seen her in that too-large too-bright hospital room, assuring him he wasn't a prisoner.

He didn't think she'd say the same, now.

Captain Izumi closed her eyes, for just the briefest of moments. Then she reopened them, and kept talking, and he felt smoke curling inside him where his fire used to live.

"The Fire Lord wants you back."

"Back where?" Azula asked, with the lightness of a question she knew wouldn't be answered.

%%%

Izumi held her silence, because the Fire Lord hadn't told her. Because it wasn't her place to make those decisions.

"Well," the princess said, "that was informative."

"I'm not going back," Prince Zuko said, meeting Izumi's gaze.

That wasn't her decision to make, either. Nor his. Izumi had been a member of the royal guard since Azulon's reign; she knew what the will of a Fire Lord could accomplish. Trees didn't get an opinion, when the forest burned: the flames of Agni's line reshaped the world.

"I won't bow to him," the prince said. "I'm not bowing, ever again."

"I also decline," the princess said, with a moray-shrike's smile. "You can tell our uncle not to worry: the fresh air is doing wonders for our *health."*

Prince Zuko was still meeting her gaze. "Thank you for speaking with us, Captain. You are dismissed."

There was a certainty to his words that he'd never had as her Fire Lord.

Captain Izumi bowed, precisely as low as a prince of the blood deserved. Then she left her prince and princess in the corridor of the Boiling Rock, surrounded by criminals and political prisoners who had no love for the crown.

Chapter 27: Prison Dossiers

Chapter Notes

Mini-Muffin is TEETHING. Take this chapter, before he mauls it.

The Boiling Rock had two types of inmates: those with end dates on their sentences, and those without.

A murderer could expect fifteen years; a rapist three. A thief more or less than the former two depending on who they stole from, though the Boiling Rock rarely dealt in such petty matters; the coal mines ate through those. For crimes against the state—sedition and subversion and disrespect of the Fire Lord and the nation his person represented—only death would do.

...As some people were too inconvenient to execute, lifetime imprisonment had to suffice.

As the royals and their (former) guards spoke, the murderers and rapists and thieves did their best to slip away unnoticed, back to their cells before the guards could get far enough into the lockdown to catch them out. The seditionists and subversives stayed.

A life sentence at the Boiling Rock left one with very little to lose.

%%%

Name: Ju-An

Crime: Subversive Play Writing

Formerly the lead playwright of the Ember Island Players. Best known for his stirring rendition of *Love Amongst the Dragons,* in which he distilled the original six hour drudgery

down to ninety minutes of captivating entertainment (suitable for all ages), and became beloved among the nation's vacation-home-owning elite because of it.

This made it inconvenient to execute him when he was found with contraband manuscripts from the Air Army itself, and notes for an adaptation written in his own hand. *Peace Amongst the Fire Lilies* was notorious as the first banned play to not even have a script.

He still received fan mail, if heavily censored. It was a health insurance policy of a sort.

%%%

"Well that's the final curtain," Ju-An said, as their fledgling royals declined to surrender in the face of a full squad of Royal Guards. It was a very royal thing to do, to think declining an option.

He remembered the prince and princess, waist-high and already thinking themselves entitled to play hide-and-explode backstage in his theater house. Their mother had been much more well mannered, but by the time she'd come to collect them the prince had already scared his lead performer half to death by appearing in their *wardrobe* and the princess had immolated a roll of their firebending ribbons when it defied her efforts to twirl it as adeptly as she did her flames.

He had hoped they would remember him more fondly than their grandfather, who had imprisoned him, or their father, who had returned his petition for release with a suggestion that Ju-An write a few plays in his honor first, but both had their turn on the throne with no thought for the man whose playhouse kept them entertained every rainy vacation day of their childhoods.

The teenagers in front of him did not appear to have become less self-absorbed than those children had been. They seemed to take it for granted that the prisoners would help them escape; hadn't questioned a moment of it.

"They're not expecting us to back them in a fight, surely?" he whispered to those nearest, less than thrilled by the prospect. Ju-An was here for the breakout; that the royals had instigated it

was incidental.

"They've got the firepower," another prisoner said. "We can always help them *slip* once we get to the gondolas."

"The gondolas have pretty high railings," the Fire Prince said, proving both that he had *extremely* good hearing and that he'd entirely missed the point.

"Lower than you'd think," smiled the princess, who hadn't.

The Royal Guards were newly departed. The prison guards had not yet arrived. The prisoners' numbers were a third of what they had been a moment ago. If they were going to act, they needed to do it now, and together.

How unfortunate, that the nobility never played nice with mere playwrights and peasants.

%%%

Name: Chit Sang

Imprisoned For: The Creation and Distribution of Seditious Pamphlets

Chit Sang didn't have the money for university, okay? It wasn't about intelligence, it was about money and *breeding.* No wealthy family meant no university meant no draft exemption. So there he was in the navy, part of the blockade. And there was this one night on shore leave at the usual town, and there were those stupid flyers those university kids were handing out, about how if everyone just worked together they could petition the government and end the draft and end the war and return the Fire Nation to its principals.

That was how they spelled it: *principals.*

And he told them, he told them on *three separate shore leaves,* it was "principles." A man has principles, a school has a principal, and what was theirs *teaching* them.

The fourth time—the fourth time he might have been a little drunk, okay?—the fourth time with the *same* kids too good for the military and the *same* little pieces of paper they thought would change anyone's mind and the *same* typo on every single one of them, well. He might have taken some of his friends out for a *real* night on the town. They'd gone to the bar, then they'd gone to the university, then they'd broken into the room with that fancy new printing press and he'd fixed that typo at the *source.* Most satisfying moment of his life.

Right up until the home guard broke in to raid the place.

It was a lot less satisfying, being on trial for writing those typo-ridden manifestos. He told the judge it wasn't him, he was in the navy, he'd been at *sea,* and if it were him he'd have proof-read the things before dumping them all over town. If it were him. Which it wasn't.

And the barristers for those little university shits had brought in all the witnesses who'd seen him talking with the kids, the kids who said they'd been intimidated by the Big Bad Bender into writing those Terrible Traitorous Things, and they were so sorry Your Honor. What bright futures they all had ahead of them once they graduated; what a horrible mark this would leave on their records; could the judge really allow that to happen to these misled children when the mastermind was standing, unrepentant, *right there?*

The penalty for sedition was execution, unless a guy shut up and took the fall. So Chit Sang did.

Principles: he *knew* wealthy brats had a different definition.

%%%

Chit Sang crossed his arms and loomed, which was an especial talent of his. "All we need to get out of here now is muscle," he said. "We've got muscle. Why should we get caught up in whatever problems *you* have?"

"Oh, betrayal," the Fire Princess said. "I am shocked, shocked to my soul's fire."

This was a quote from the unabridged version of *Love Amongst the Dragons.* The playwright and the prince, as the only two to recognize it, took a moment to glare at her for the droll delivery.

"That was atrocious," the playwright said. "And I believe it should go without saying that I will risk my life for freedom, but not for *your* freedom."

This was, itself, a much abridged version of the final climactic speech in *The Sandbender's Soliloquy.* Some might even call it a butchering thereof. The prince and princess glared at him.

"I hate to interrupt the posturing," one of the female prisoners said, "but the sand clock is running. Can we save the political infighting for the boat ride out of here?"

"Ship," Chit Sang corrected. "You don't take a boat this far out into the open ocean. It'll be a ship."

No one glared at him, but only because no one cared.

"We've got muscle and firepower," she said. "What we don't have is time, and there's a detail you all seem to be forgetting that we need to figure out *before* we get there."

Her name was Nari, and logistics was what she *did.*

%%%

Name: Nari

Crime: Embezzling Military Funds

Nari was the daughter of a minor colony logistics officer, and her career path followed the same. She was competent, but not too competent. Too-competent lowborn officials were apt to get promoted out of their cushy dockside offices and onto the frontlines, where the *real* supply issues were.

Too-competent officials, left sitting bored in their cushy offices, were apt to find the account inconsistencies that revealed a colony-wide embezzlement scheme from the governor's office on down.

In retrospect, the blackmail attempt had been a bad idea, and a good way to get scape-rat-goated.

At least they'd taken her threats with literal-minded seriousness. "If I die, all that evidence is getting mailed to the Fire Sages," indeed.

She was going to live a very, very long time if she stuck around here. (Or a very short time, if the people she'd left those records with decided to try their own hustle.)

%%%

Logistically speaking, and to use the proper terminology, escape from the Boiling Rock was FUBAR from the get-go on a typical day.

The water was already shut off in their section; that put them on a time limit even before Nari factored in the lockdown sweeps currently in progress. They were fighting against heat stroke as much as they were fighting against the guards, and the actual act of *fighting* would only accelerate matters. On a typical day, thanks to the Warden's penchant for schedule randomization, she couldn't have even guaranteed that there would be an escape method waiting for them on the other side of the gondolas.

A typical day didn't involve two former Fire Lords and an entire squadron of Royal Guards coming to visit. There was *definitely* a boat docked out there. Or a ship; whatever. The only thing standing between them and freedom was a brawl. She liked those odds.

She didn't have to like the company.

She could remember a rusty ship that stopped at her dockside offices every few months, and the banished prince who thought shouting at the clerks was going to get him his supplies faster. As if they were the problem, when it was higher-ups like Zhao getting their chuckles off by ordering the delays. Kid would rather yell at the person in front of him than the people *actually* responsible. Responsibility wasn't a strength of most sixteen-year-olds, in general.

"Even if we make it to the gondolas, that doesn't get *all* of us out," Nari said. "We need to leave behind enough fighters to keep them from cutting the lines. I don't suppose *Their Highnesses* are volunteering, so..."

"Yeah, I could do that," the Fire Prince said.

"...Who's staying? If we can't decide, we should just scrap— Wait, what?"

The prince shrugged under their collective gazes. "I could stay."

"No you won't," she scoffed, at the same time the princess was saying, "No you *won't,"* in an entirely different tone.

"It's not that big of a deal," Prince Zuko said, turning to his sister. "Hold them off until you're on the other side, right? Then I just need to get across the lines before they finish cutting. They looked wide enough for running. Probably."

" 'Probably'," the princess parroted, to the prince's continued shrugging.

"That sounds like fun," Ty Lee said.

"That sounds like idiocy," Mai said.

(The playwright Ju-An remembered, suddenly, that time they'd delayed a show because the prince was in the *rafters.)*

There were sounds in the corridor behind them; the lockdown sweep was almost on them.

The prince who met their eyes wasn't shouting. He had way better hair now, too, though Nari had no clue what was up with the Earth Kingdom style.

"Are you coming?" he asked, and she realized he'd already run the numbers. *His* party was going ahead with this escape, whether the rest of them were or not. They weren't waiting *on* the prisoners, they were waiting *for* them.

"Why?" she asked, eyes narrowed. "What do you get out of bringing us along?"

"You might not believe this," he said, "But I'd like to *actually* help someone escape, for once."

His sister snorted.

She did believe him. What she didn't believe was that this kid was the same one who'd left her ears ringing for hours.

(Nari remembered the spike of unsolved supply thefts that accompanied every denied request for the prince's ship; particularly the ones that involved clothing or food for his crew. Sixteen-year-olds shouldn't have *had* to be responsible.)

"Yeah," she said. "All right. After you, Your Highness."

(Chit Sang didn't have any previous memories of the royals, but he was about to make some.)

Chapter 28: Orders Are Orders

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hugs were amazing and Sokka was, henceforth, never not doing them.

"Can't breathe, Sokka," Suki said, totally proving that she could breathe, and that Sokka was not hugging her anywhere near tightly enough. The following squeak and tap out against his back was much more convincing, but… no, he could do better. The sudden shift of weight and she was slipping out of his hold and grabbing one of his arms and then he was staring up at her smile from the floor was *much* more convincing.

"I missed you," he said.

"I gathered that," she said, and offered him a hand up. The hand up was followed by a hug. Which, it turned out, felt even better when she initiated. "It's so good to see you," she said, soft and low by his ear, like speaking any louder might scare this whole prison extraction off.

He had, of course, already hugged his dad. His dad who was alive and here and fully capable of making Sokka's ribs creak. One of the sweetest sounds known to man.

Captain Izumi had tried—was trying—to herd them off to the relative safety of the Warden's office. Which was an extremely questionable safety to begin with, and Sokka was *much* harder to herd now that his dad was standing by his shoulder, arms crossed, staring down any Fire Nation-y person who came too close. There would be no more physically dragging him off, not unless the captain wanted a very physical fight. Sokka was existing in a bubble of Skeptical Dad Protection, and it was the most wonderful feeling ever.

"This area is not safe," the captain had said. She was clearly speaking as someone who had spent the past year in places that *could* be called safe. Sokka could not relate.

"I'm not saying that if we don't see Zuko get arrested and immediately take him into custody ourselves then somehow he's going to slip out of it," Sokka said, "but I am definitely saying

that."

It was just this *feeling* he had.

"My orders—"

"Are to protect me," Sokka said. "Yes, I got that. I can even sort of appreciate it, though I admit the whole 'surrounded by forces who were loyal to Ozai three months ago' thing does not feel as *protectiony* as I think you're going for. Counter offer: can we watch from up there?"

He pointed up, to the walkway overlooking the gondola platform. Nice and out of the direct fight.

The captain closed her eyes and took in a breath and let it out in a counting-to-ten-in-her-head way, then led them up. Another win for compromise.

This was why Sokka was in the perfect position to see Zuko and his prison posse reaching the landing. There were less prisoners with them then there had been, but still way more than Sokka was comfortable with, because *hardened criminal backup.* The guards had them vastly outnumbered, but Zuko had Azula and pokey girl and knife-throwy-girl, which were a mini army unto themselves.

...Or would have been, if either of the Fire siblings was actually using their flames. Azula was mostly just strolling through the center of their fight, occasionally taking down any guard who dared attack her, looking bored. Zuko was... using swords? He wasn't the only person down there with them, but Fire ~~Prince~~ ~~Lord~~ fire*bender* Zuko was using *swords.*

He was using *two* swords.

He was using two swords a lot better than Sokka could use one.

%%%

(It wasn't hard to get two swords off the guards they'd beaten on the way here. It *was* hard to get two with matching weights and the distinctive shape of his own dao, left back on the balloon. Zuko was feeling exceptionally sloppy in his swordsmanship.)

%%%

Hakoda watched the landing being flooded by guards, those who'd already been stationed there joined by those being called back from every corner of the prison. The teenagers were *good,* but the same could not be said of every prisoner with them. They would be overrun before long, especially if they continued to avoid killing.

The Fire Princess' words came, unbidden, to the back of his mind: *As long as my dear, sincere brother is alive and free, we'll tear ourselves apart.*

"How much do you trust this new Fire Lord?" Hakoda asked his son, trying to speak low enough that their escort couldn't overhear.

Sokka… hesitated.

"He helped train Aang," he said, after that delay. "He's been with us for months, he helped plan Ozai's defeat, he fought to free Ba Sing Se. I trust that he wants to end the war, and he's not out to backstab us. Is this really the time to talk about it?"

With two-thirds of Fire Lord Iroh's rivals for the throne about to come under the man's control, it was exactly the time. Possibly the only time.

World peace was one thing. What was best for the Southern Water Tribe, possibly another. Hakoda tensed as the escapees were pushed back by the newest wave of guards, now on the

defensive instead of the offensive.

Doesn't a divided Fire Nation sound wonderful?

His son had hesitated. Hakoda did, too.

Suki did not.

"I'm getting a full pardon, right?" she asked.

"Right," his son replied, distracted by the sight below.

Which was the point Suki nodded to herself, and vaulted the rail.

"Wait, no, wrong—"

%%%

"—Wrong!" someone was shouting, but Zuko was a little distracted by his sister, who was starting to get irritated—

"They're just earwig-flies, Zuko. If you'd let me swat them, we'd be out of here with all your new turtleducklings."

"No murder," he repeated, standing between her and a guard who'd looked mortality in the eye and found it to be a teenage girl. Behind her, the Kyoshi Warrior dropped directly down on another guard about to attack them. This saved Zuko from having to defend that one, too. "Please, La— Azula."

"Good save," Azula said.

"I'm not doing it for you," Suki said.

"That's fine," Azula said, with a roll of her eyes. "I wasn't talking to you."

Suki entered the fray, filling in gaps where playwrights, desk officers, and their other non-combatant subversives were having trouble. (Chit Sang was not having trouble. Chit Sang picked up a guard, and used them as a battering ram against a line of others. This allowed their group to take two collective steps closer to their goal.)

The Boiling Rock was one of the Fire Nation's most well funded prisons, and its remote location meant that every single shift lived on base and was available for backup. This was, of course, detailed in the Warden's plan, in the unlikely event of his other anti-escape measures failing. The guards weren't limited by numbers, but by how many of them could fit on the landing at one time.

A lot. It was a lot. Ty Lee wasn't as bouncy as she'd been at the start. Mai might even run out of knives. Zuko honestly still felt pretty good, better than he had during his Agni Kai, but he recognized that his own health was a low bar to reach.

"Would you rather be locked away again?" Azula asked.

"Yes," he answered, and got back to not killing his people.

His people did not share the sentiment.

%%%

The Water Tribe ambassador was trying to throw himself over the railing. Captain Izumi had caught one of his arms; his father had gotten the other. On this, at least, they were agreed.

If the chief had let her do her job earlier, hadn't looked ready to fight over bringing the ambassador to safety, his son wouldn't be trying to crack open his own head on the metal plating below. If the ambassador had allowed himself and his group to be led away from the fight, his girlfriend wouldn't have been here to make the leap look easy.

If Captain Izumi had exerted better control over the situation, had wrangled her charges better, they would all be tucked away safe right now. She'd failed.

She'd failed Azulon, who had been in good health when she went to sleep on a night years ago. She'd failed Ozai, who had scoffed at the idea of needing something so trite as trained and loyal guards to watch his back in the field. She'd failed Azula, who had *laughed* when she'd knelt to re-swear her oaths. Laughed, and sent her away, and Izumi had chosen to interpret that as *get out of my sight and keep doing your job* instead of *you're banished like all the rest.* She'd failed Zuko.

She kept failing Zuko.

Arms full of a squirming teenager, she didn't even see the moment it happened. Only the immediate aftermath: the flames dispersed by wind rather than the block of a royal firebender. The prince falling backwards, a hand coming up to his shoulder, his neck, and then recoiling from the touch as if—

As if burned.

She couldn't see how bad it was, from here. All she had to go by was his brief shout, a choked-off thing like a child who'd had too much practice.

The prince was down.

His sister stepped forward.

%%%

Azula was back to Plan A.

"So you like burning people," she asked, conversationally. "It's so nice to share hobbies."

Zuzu had been a Dum-Dum and forgotten his own fire was out: he'd tried to block instead of dodge. Good to know he hadn't been lying about not being able to defend against her own flames; it let her strangle one of those niggling little voices in her head, the one that said *he lies he lies he's afraid of you like all the rest he lies.* She pushed a pillow onto it and held it down as she took another step, and batted away the guard's frantic flames, and lit a little blue candlelight over her finger that would slice through his armour, peel this offensive snail-roach from its shell for her to squish and salt and burn—

"Azula, no!"

"One moment, Zuzu, the adults are talking."

"Please please please," the snail-roach was saying, backpedalling until he was against the rail and the only way was down down to the rocks below her lovely cliffside view. There were burns on the man's arms she didn't remember giving him; clearly they had appeared because he *should* have them, he was right to have them, of course he had them. There was a hastily cleared space between them. How lovely it was when people gave her room: lessons were most instructive when they only needed to be delivered once.

"My brother said please," she said, "just a moment ago. 'Please don't kill them.' You really should have listened to him. I did."

Past tense.

"Please."

"Azula."

And there was Zuzu, getting between them, his new burn tracing raw and red from the arm he'd tried to disperse the flames with up to his shoulder, over his collar bone, speckle-spotted with little ember singes up the side of his neck until it could have been a continuation of father's lesson. He was letting the arm hang useless. His swords were somewhere back on the ground, which was an entirely quaint way to face her.

The guard behind him was taller, but trying hard not to look it.

"Going to say please again, Zuzu? He's saying it quite enough for both of you."

Zuko breathed out, then back in, like it would do anything for his absent flames. "I told you I'd stand between you if you choose to hurt someone."

"That was supposed to be figurative, Zuko."

Her brother furrowed his brow. "When am I ever figurative?"

She hated how much of a point that was.

"Fine. I hope you're keeping track of your breadcrumbs, brother; they'll eat and eat and eat until all that's left to eat is you."

It took longer for the guards to get up their nerve to attack again than it did for them to take her brother down. They still kept a respectful distance from her, of course. She quirked an eyebrow at Zuko as they pulled his arms behind him, even the burned one. He scowled back,

as if *she* were the problem here. They were trying to force him to his knees. She wished them luck with that; her brother had said he was never kneeling for someone again and he was, as recently demonstrated, rather literal.

"Surrender," the Warden said, calling down from the same supposed safety of that overlook that the Avatar's friend was using.

"Stand down," ordered another voice.

%%

"This has gone on long enough," Captain Izumi said. "The Royal Guard is taking command, Warden."

She stepped away from the Water Tribe boy, whose father was not enough to stop him from jumping the rail.

"By all means," the Warden graciously allowed, because his guards had only apprehended the prince and a handful of their escaping prisoners. The rest were still very much free. He did not watch his niece fighting with any particular feelings, of course; there was no favoritism here.

"Release him," the captain continued, which was not at all the order the Warden expected to follow.

"You can't do this," he said, and, "I won't let you do this," which were two different things, equally unenforceable.

The captain was already issuing hand signals. Had been, since her first words. Her guards were already down the stairs; they shoved through his own and forced the prince's release. The princess laughed, a sound that was overly loud in the ensuing silence.

Two other Royal Guards gripped the Warden's arms. Captain Izumi removed the gondola key from his neck.

"I'll die before letting this happen," he said.

"Your protests will be noted in the official record," she said. "I outrank you. Follow your orders, soldier."

Captain Izumi was too old for jumping rails. She took the stairs.

%%%

Azula remained impressed with her brother's aptitude for laying breadcrumb trails to treason.

%%%

Sokka had honestly felt safer when he was dropping into a fighting mess of prisoners and guards than when the lady who'd come here to guard *him* stepped down among them.

"This isn't what your Fire Lord would want," he said, probably drawing more attention to himself than he should.

"I have no orders for this," she said, with her utmost formality. "In the absence of orders, it is the Royal Guard's sworn duty to serve their nation to the best of their ability."

Sokka was stunned speechless by the amount of civil disobedience she was construing into that sworn duty of hers.

"Thanks for jumping down," Suki whispered to him, nudging his arm as they watched… this. Whatever this was. *This* was the prison guards trying to look to their Warden for guidance, but the Warden's very vocal protests were getting quieter—well, not quieter, but certainly further away—as the captain's men hauled him off down the hallway above to… somewhere. A cell? His office? The boiling lake of no-inconvenient-evidence?

No, Sokka was not feeling his safest.

At least he had Suki at his side. And possibly her friends. Ty Lee was standing with them, not with the royals. Mai wasn't, but only because she was going around to the guards pinned to various railings, walls, and the ground to reclaim her knives. And he had his dad too, who was treating everyone but Suki and him to the same *try me and see* stare as he worked his way over to them.

"Dad, we need to do something."

His dad set a hand on his shoulder, and didn't do anything.

%%%

A civil war did sound good.

A Fire Lord who didn't see his people as expendable resources sounded… not better, because Hakoda knew exactly how dangerous a leader could be when protecting his own. But it would certainly make the boy something different than the Fire Lords before him. Different might be worth risking.

Hakoda would not help the Fire Prince. But he wasn't about to risk his own life, or his son's, to help the Dragon of the West retain his throne.

%%%

The prison guards stood down. There wasn't much choice, when any action they took could be construed as disobeying a superior officer; they might as well take the option that didn't involve fighting the Fire Princess again. Or the Royal Guard.

"May I see your burn?" Captain Izumi asked.

"No," Zuko said.

"...Do you have medical supplies?"

This was also a no. The captain ordered such supplies found. And food and water, enough for all the escapees.

"You really think we're staying here while you and your people stall with *niceties?"* the princess scoffed.

"I think you're staying until *your* people are on the other side," the captain said. "Those gondolas are slow."

She wasn't wrong.

The captain's orders to retrieve supplies had involved no twitch of hand-signed subterfuge. She cleared the landing of any guard not her own, and set those that remained at a perimeter that gave the prisoners breathing room. She gave them the key to the gondola controls. She didn't try to see his new burn again.

She seemed trustworthy. Zuko *wanted* to trust her. But he had people to protect who hadn't stood back while Iroh challenged him, and he couldn't, he physically *couldn't,* looking at her and thinking *trust* made numbness creep up his fingertips and everything was so distant, she couldn't ask this of him again, she *couldn't*—

Azula poked his new burn.

"Oww," he scowled, shooting her a glare.

"If you leave me alone to handle this," she said, "I will *handle* it."

He looked over their party. They'd have to drag a few unconscious ex-prisoners with them, but they hadn't *lost* anyone. Mai was rearmed and Ty Lee and Suki were getting their wind back and the Water Tribe ambassador and his father were inexplicably here, which… was. A thing.

He pinched the bridge of his nose with his unburned hand, took in a breath, and focused on his burn because at least it was something that didn't need anything from him. It wasn't even that bad; just like a training burn, but… bigger. The guard had pulled his punch in that same wide-eyed moment when he and Zuko had both realized Zuko's block was doing nothing. It had been one of those basic firebending moves to make your opponent react, to force them to deflect, a five year old could have turned those flames away—

Zuko let out his breath. Slowly.

"We won't all fit in the first gondola," he said. "I'll wait here to guard the controls."

In case it was a trap. In case this was another case of him misunderstanding the captain's loyalties.

(He hadn't misunderstood them at all; he'd just ignored the issue until the Fire Lord she was loyal to wasn't him anymore.)

"Understood," the captain said.

"Not alone, you're not," Azula said. "If I leave you then the dream moves on without you."

He knew the feeling.

"Wow," Ambassador Snoozles said. "You are really crazy, huh."

"So?" the Fire siblings replied, in perfect deadpan unison.

%%%

The last prisoners were on the far landing, disembarking. The other gondola was here, empty and waiting. Azula and Mai and Ty Lee had stayed with him, which was two more people than he'd expected.

...Also Suki and Snoozles and Snoozles' dad, which was still a thing.

"Are you… coming with us?" he asked the older man, who seemed to know what to do with that question exactly as much as Zuko did.

"...No thank you," the chief settled on, his arms crossed.

At least he was polite about it.

Mai was opening the gondola's door. Ty Lee was looking up at the cables above, a wishful bounce in her step. Azula was leaning against the controls, casually threatening the royal guard stationed there with the little fire dancing over her hand. It was time to go.

"Wait," Zuko said. "There's one more thing."

He looked at the Water Tribe ambassador as he said it. Snoozles did not look thrilled to be looked upon.

Inside the Warden's office was a plate of refreshments, minus some kiwi-grapes. The Warden, cuffed to his own chair, guarded by Izumi's people. And the prison ledger, with the names and recorded crimes of everyone here. Zuko took it under the Warden's scowl, and held it out towards the Water Tribe boy.

"Could you give this to the Avatar? Please. Not to Uncle."

Snoozles took it, and immediately started flipping through the heavy book with the same skepticism he'd once shown Zuko's trade proposals. "Why?"

"There's a lot of people here who shouldn't be. More than are leaving with us. Critics of the war and my family. They're not going to be a priority for Iroh; letting them out won't help him rule." Rather the opposite, actually.

They hadn't helped Zuko rule, and he hadn't even thought about them. And no one had brought them to his attention; no one would have dared.

"If the Avatar asks for their release, he might listen."

(If the Avatar asked, Azula noted, then all the Avatar's allies would know if the new Fire Lord *didn't* listen. Breadcrumbs and breadcrumbs; did Zuzu even realize his pockets had holes?)

Zuko bowed. The tribesman did not bow back. But he held onto the book.

Mai plucked a pomegranate-grape from the Warden's desk. "Bye, uncle," she said. "Thanks for the refreshments."

%%%

Sokka watched as Mai and Ty Lee and Azula and Zuko got on the gondola. So did Suki.

"Suki, what...?"

She leaned out the door and gave him a smile, but didn't come back.

"Pardon," he said, in a last ditch effort to make this day not end even worse. "You're getting a pardon."

"I just helped the rebel Fire Lords escape, Sokka. *I* just escaped. I'm not giving up my freedom for the promise of freedom. If he means this peace thing, have him release all my warriors, and send them home. Then I'll meet with him. Until then, I'm with them." She tilted her head towards a gondola full of very dangerous teenagers.

Azula obligingly lit a flame. Suki snorted.

"You can't take yourself hostage!" Sokka protested.

"I think I just did." She smiled. The expression dropped as she continued to look at him. She stepped off the gondola for a moment, just two quick steps, and then she was kissing him so briefly he didn't have the chance to kiss her back. Her lips moved to his ear, her breath warm over his skin.

"You really want to leave those two unsupervised? I'll be in touch. Mai and Ty Lee will protect me."

"You can see why that wouldn't reassure me," he whispered back.

They'd had this conversation once before, under moonlight at the Serpent's Pass. "I can take care of myself, remember? You can't keep me away from every danger. I hear that kind of thinking got Mai's boyfriend in trouble, too."

"Who's her boyfriend?" Sokka asked, curious. Curious became worried at her silent smirk. *"Who's her boyfriend?"*

Suki was still grinning as she stepped back into the gondola. She blew him another kiss as the door closed.

%%%

From the landing, they could see the smoke of a Fire Nation ship leaving dock, and a red war balloon rising.

Captain Izumi turned to her second, and bowed.

The woman bowed back.

"Captain Izumi," she said, "your actions have become erratic. Until such time as the Fire Lord reinstates you, I am forced to relieve you of command. In the name of Fire Lord Iroh, long may he reign, I place you under arrest for treason to the throne."

Treason to the throne, not to the Fire Nation. Sokka knew the difference, now.

So did Captain Izumi. Of the two of them, it had taken her far longer to learn.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko's new burn location brought to you by Tumblr. Tumblr: where if you ask where to hurt a Zuko, you will get like thirty replies in the first thirty seconds.

@jedimasterjaina: "collar bone, mess with his range of motion in an arm for max angst"
@sangrientojoe: "hands/wrists like shielding himself from something"
@electronswrites: "Neck, where it can touch the first one, like it's something spreading throughout him."

selects "all of the above"

Chapter 29: Interlude: Breadcrumbs

Sokka limped into the courtyard that housed the Gaang's rooms. Turns out a guy shouldn't jump railings on a recently-broken totally-healed-now leg. Who knew? Sokka on an adrenaline rush certainly hadn't.

"Sokka!" his lovely sister shouted, running to embrace him. "We were so worried when the hawks started coming, are you all right? Is dad all right? Is Suki? Did you break your leg again, sit down—"

"Technically," Sokka said, making with the sitting down, "that's three yeses and a no."

"Technically?" she wrinkled her brow. Then: *"Dad!"*

More hugging followed, as dad—still in his prison clothes—entered at much less of a limp.

"What happened?" Aang asked.

"Where's Suki?" Katara asked, finally looking past dad.

"So, funny story," Sokka said. "Funny, dare I say *hilarious,* story. How much got through on the messenger hawks?"

"There was a breakout," Aang said, "and Azula and Zuko were there, and some prisoners stole your ship so Iroh had to send another?"

"Haaa," was a sound that came from Sokka's mouth. "Yes. Yes, let's start there. Actually, no. Let's start with: was anyone going to tell me that Zuko is a *master swordsman?"*

Avatar Aang, Master of All Four Suspicious Shifty Movements, was suddenly looking at everything except him.

"That was a rhetorical question, Aang," Sokka said. "Aang. *Aang."*

"Ooo," Toph dug her toes into the ground, grinning wide. *"Spill,* Twinkletoes."

Pohuai Stronghold: a conversation they should have had *months* ago.

%%%

"You packed the pink coat!" Ty Lee squealed, blithely rummaging through their spare clothes. *Azula's* clothes. Suki was already holding a shirt up to herself appraisingly.

"Zuko packed the pink coat," Azula replied, snatching said shirt from the Kyoshi Warrior's hand. "I simply failed to incinerate it. There is a difference."

The Warrior scowled, and grabbed another shirt at random. As this was one of Zuko's—specifically, one of his atrociously green former *teaboy* outfits—Azula allowed it.

Meanwhile, Mai was pointedly folding a piece of paper she'd stolen from the Warden's office. She walked it across the very small cramped-war-balloon distance, and shoved it into Zuko's chest.

It was a breakup letter.

"...This isn't any better than mine," Zuko said.

"I'll do better next time," Mai droned.

%%%

Mai's uncle had written a letter, as well. It had gone out with the last of the Boiling Rock's hawks, just before he and the other pertinent witnesses to this debacle were *escorted* onto a newly arrived ship by yet more members of the overly lauded Royal Guard.

The hawk circled a moment with the others. Then, its bearings found, it winged steadily towards the colonies.

The Warden had not been allowed a blade to rectify his disgrace. In the extra time this allotted him to think, he had decided that a pen would suffice.

%%%

"And that is when you told my nephew that he was under arrest," Iroh said.

"It devalued them as hostages in the eyes of those who would use them," Captain Izumi said, as she knelt before the flames of his throne. She added, with the dry professionalism of a woman who'd spent decades explaining herself to the nobility: "Such as the prisoners you sent us to retrieve."

She was not yet in prison clothes, but she was no longer in the armor of her rank. Her hands were uncuffed, as a courtesy for her long service, and as a reminder to watchers that the Fire Lord did not fear a single guard.

"It also escalated the situation past your control, Captain, and left my *unwell* niece and nephew with a false impression of my intentions."

"I don't believe it did," she said, and did not clarify to which part of his statement she was referring.

His fingers pressed into the carved arms of his throne. "Why did you not bring them home? Others testify that you could have."

"Perhaps I misunderstood your orders," the captain said. *"Were* they under arrest?"

The flames between them did not flare. Iroh had better control than that.

He had placed Azula in an asylum because she had been habitually threatening the staff, her family, and herself with her bending; because she had been, to all accounts, in need of such an institution's particular help. Zuko had described her situation as *hurting no one,* when he had nearly died because of the damage she'd caused his heart. Nearly died from overwork, as well. Nearly died for more cumulative reasons than Iroh's own heart could think on for long. What *was* the word, for dragging runaway children back home for their own good?

Parenting.

But he did not think anyone, particularly the former captain in front of him, would change their mind upon hearing that word.

And he had never done well, as a parent. Lu Ten, Zuko—

Thank you for the lesson, father.

Iroh had hoped to have him home, before the lines being drawn in the capital and across the nation placed Zuko on one side, and Iroh on the other. Before anyone else tried to force his son into being the figurehead of a movement, rather than a sixteen year old who might, even now, have no idea what he'd started.

It was a day since the failed coronation, and already too late for that.

"You will resign, Captain," he said. "I hear your home is quite lovely. Perhaps you would care to remain there."

"Only my Fire Lord can accept my resignation," she said.

She was removed to her cell. His guards—the Fire Lord's guards—escorted in the next witness. Through the flames, he could not see if any of them were meeting his eyes.

Her trial, when it came, was before a closed court. Her sentence was to the Boiling Rock, for a term indeterminate.

%%%

Suki and Ty Lee lay on their backs on the war balloon's floor, shoulder to shoulder, their feet propped up on its side, taking up more than their fair share of the cramped space. Azula made a point of kicking them everytime she renewed the balloon's hot air.

"I should have run those gondola cables," Ty Lee said. "They just looked so fun, you know?"

"You'll do better next time," Suki said, because that was now going to be a thing their group said to each other.

"My letter wasn't *that* bad," Zuko groused. Then: *"Oww,"* because it was Mai who was changing his bandages.

"We have ropes here you can die on," Azula offered.

Ty Lee stared up at the steel cables holding the balloon in place, and sighed. "It's just not the same without the boiling lake."

"It really isn't," Suki said, with proper prison solidarity.

%%%

"But why didn't he deflect it?" agonized another guard, recently pardoned in his own closed court for the crime of injuring one of royal blood. "I saw his stance, it was perfect, it shouldn't have touched him—"

The palace guards swept an eye around the kitchen, then huddled closer around their visitor.

"What do you know about the Avatar?" they asked.

%%%

People around the palace were *looking* at Aang. Looking at him even worse than they had two weeks ago, when it had become common knowledge that he'd defeated Ozai by taking his bending. Looking at him in a way they weren't even looking at Iroh, who could put them in jail for as long as he wanted. And apparently it was normal for Fire Lords to do that because Sokka had brought back that ledger that went back *decades* and some of those people had been sent to prison for protesting the war or the royal family while Azulon was alive and Iroh was the crown prince, and—and Aang wanted to show him the ledger and get all those people freed, but not today, not right after Iroh had spent hours questioning all those people and then making that ruling against the captain (not the *trial,* the *ruling,* there hadn't been a trial, did the Fire Nation not do those? Did the Fire Lord not?) and—

And.

"Avatar Aang," Iroh said, ceasing their practice. "I sense you have something on your mind."

She was just doing what she thought was right, Aang could have said. *People shouldn't go to jail for doing what's right, even if it was wrong.*

But it was harder to speak up in the Fire Lord's court than he'd thought.

(Zuko had spoken up. Zuko had spoken up against *Ozai,* when he'd been only a year older than Aang . This was just Iroh, who would listen and talk Aang through things and by the end it would make sense. Aang had only been invited to the final ruling; maybe there was something he'd missed in all the questioning, something that explained why Iroh couldn't just let her go—

But he didn't want it to make sense. Because it felt wrong in his chest, and what if it *kept* feeling wrong, even after Iroh talked his head around?)

"People are scared of me," he said, instead. "They think I took Zuko's bending."

Iroh sighed, and sat down on the courtyard's veranda, and patted the wood next to him. Aang joined him.

"They do not understand what you did to Ozai. New bending techniques, particularly those with no known counter, can be frightening."

"Do you think I was wrong?"

"I think it would have been difficult to capture or contain my brother if his bending remained intact; your actions have prevented him from hurting even more people. I think a living man, brought to justice before the world, will heal rifts that a dead man could not. I think that finding a way to avoid killing him is something your people would be proud of. I think that *I* am proud of you, for being the Avatar we truly need: you remind us that the true end to war is not through killing, but through compassion for one's enemies."

Aang felt better for a second. And then… not. "Your people think their inner fire is a gift from the sun god. That taking it is *worse* than killing. You didn't tell me that."

Iroh stroked his beard. "It was hard to tell in advance how most would perceive your actions. I did not know, after all, that it was a gift that could be taken."

Because Aang had run away, and hadn't had time to tell anyone about what the lion-turtle had taught him when he got back. Because the comet was already there and they were already fighting without him.

His thumbs chased each other, over and over in little wind-spinning circles. "Why didn't you tell me after? When you'd had time to think about it?"

Iroh gave a smile. It seemed a little tired. "It is a delight to savor a fresh moon peach," he said, "until the worm at its center is found."

"Eww. So you were going to tell me later. But you wanted us to have time to feel good about winning, first?"

"Just so, Avatar Aang."

Iroh's gaze traveled over to the far side of the courtyard, where Katara was healing Sokka's leg for the second time that day. He'd kind of thought that demonstrating his dramatic leap from the prison rail had been in order. He'd only done it from the veranda down to the ground, but his *oww* had told them all that it had been a bad idea before Katara had a chance to.

"I had hoped that my nephew would regain his fire with his freedom, at least," Iroh said. "Or that he would have stayed, even if he had turned down the crown, long enough that I could introduce him to some old acquaintances of mine. Avatar Aang, you bend fire, but you are not yet a fire*bender;* you have not yet felt the truth of your inner flame. I believe the Masters Ran and Shaw could be of some assistance to you. It would help me to see them again, as well. I feel I could use the reminder."

%%%

"So where are we going?" Mai asked. She had not joined Suki and Ty Lee in laying on the floor. She was sitting, like a person who had left prison with her dignity intact.

"An uninhabited island," Zuko said. "It's in the north of the archipelago. We can rest there before we cross to the Earth Kingdom."

"Is there anything interesting there?" Ty Lee asked.

"Ruins and oversized wildlife, apparently," Azula replied. She was referring to the reported bugs.

She was correct, regardless.

Chapter 30: Landing

Five teenagers should never spend a multiple of that time in an increasingly cramped war balloon.

"Oh thank the spirits," Suki said, flopping onto the sand.

Ty Lee, whose energy level had spiked in the confined space, somersaulted over her, presumably just because she could. The distinctive sound of someone splashing in waves followed. "It's just like Ember Island!"

"Watch out for the unagi," Suki said, on reflex. The clouds above were fluffy and far apart, the sky endlessly blue, and if she didn't turn her head she could pretend all that infinite elbowroom applied to her, too.

There was a rock outcropping not far off, and a tide pool full of spiky things. Sitting at its edge apparently suited Mai much better than flopping in sand or splashing in the surf.

"It's better than jail," Mai allowed.

"Arguable," Azula said, leaning against their faithful transport's basket, helpfully supervising her brother as he wrangled its rapidly deflating balloon.

"I could use some help here," he said.

"I'm sure you could," replied his sister.

"*You* were in jail?" Suki asked.

The Fire Princess rolled her eyes. "We were *all* in jail. Though I suppose mine was a sanatorium."

Yeah. Suki was just going to keep watching her clouds and not think about how high the sky went, or how many hours she'd spent trusting *that* girl to keep her and her friends from plummeting. Maybe the balloon's basket would have floated. Maybe.

The prince had wrestled the fabric to the ground, and was now attempting to fold it. This came close to infringing upon Suki's flopping spot. It *did* infringe upon her uninterrupted view of the sky. Also, he was definitely trying to do things mostly one-armed. His sister continued to not help him.

With a sigh, Suki rolled back to her feet, and grabbed the fabric opposite him. "Ty Lee. Mai."

Things went a lot faster with four. Or three and a half: between the prince's injured arm and his apparent confusion about the sudden backup, he didn't completely count. Azula kept leaning against the basket, not helping.

"Thanks," the Fire Prince said, when the balloon was stowed and Ty Lee had followed Mai back to her tide pool.

"Thanks for getting us out," Suki said. "Still not forgiving you for burning down my village, though."

"The Avatar can *waterbend."*

"He couldn't then."

"Yes. He could." (Large-scale, deck swamping quantities of waterbending, Zuko did not add.) "You gave him shelter; he was obviously going to help you."

"That doesn't negate the part where you lit my peoples' houses on fire. Personal responsibility is sexy, you know."

"I don't *want* to be sexy. I just want to," he waved his good arm in a way that probably meant something to him, "to be on an abandoned island with my sister, on my way to another nation, and everyone can just forget I ever existed, including the people whose houses I lit on fire."

"Is this an apology?" Suki asked. "Because I'm starting to see why you write letters."

"It's not an apology," the prince scowled. "I'm done apologizing."

"Are you," Suki said, narrowing her eyes.

"Yes."

"Funny," she said, "from where I'm standing, it feels like you've only just begun to be sorry."

"Oh, just fight it out," the princess said, with a dismissive flap of her hand. "You're both non-benders now, it's fair enough."

"Excuse me?" Suki said.

She received another hand flap for her efforts.

"Give me one of your swords," Suki growled.

"You can have two," the prince said, which is how she ended up with the swords he'd swiped off the prison guards while he pulled a sheath and *dual dao* out of nowhere, and oh, *now* he

was using both arms.

%%%

As the ensuing acrobatics repeatedly kicked sand her way, Azula huffed, and stalked over to the tide pool. There were clown anemones waving their many head-tentacles, and fire goby crabs darting about in sunbeams between mossy clumps of multi-hued seaweeds. A blue-ringed catopus kitten looked up at her and *mewed* a distorted, underwater *mew.* It was an idyllic microcosm of nature. She wondered how much heat it would take to boil.

"Our feet are in here," Mai said, correctly predicting the direction of her thoughts, as Mai was wont to do.

"I'll take that under advisement," Azula said, sitting on a rock. Not one so close as to be mistaken for being *with* them.

Ty Lee leaned back and back on the heels on her palms, and looked at her. *Smiled* at her. "Thanks for coming for us, Azula."

"It was Zuko's idea," she scoffed.

"Yeah, but you didn't stop him."

She could scoff again. But that might be mistaken as *caring* about this topic. Instead, she lay a theatrical hand over her heart. "I am known for my indulgent nature."

Ty Lee laughed. Mai didn't.

"Why couldn't we find him?" the black-clad girl said. Speaking of clothing: why had *everyone* chosen Zuko's shirts over Azula's? Was it a fundamental failing in taste? The only

one wearing anything of Azula's was Ty Lee and her pink coat, which Azula formally *disowned* —

"Azula?" Ty Lee asked, her eyes crinkling in that smiling-but-worried way she'd developed before their little treason attempt, after Zuko's imprisonment, when Azula had to be more careful about thinking through her answers because father was seeing treasonous disappointing children *everywhere.* It wasn't that she was lost in her thoughts; incautious time-wasting delays like that were for other people.

"Zuzu?" Azula said. "Oh, that's simple. Stone prison. Dai Li. After our uncle broke out, father stopped believing in letting family members leave. He also stopped believing in doors. You went right past his cell, actually." She gave a little shrug, palms up, what *was* one to do?

"You know we were just worried, right?" Ty Lee asked, quiet as a snake-rat. "For both of you. We would have asked you to come rescue him, too, but if we were caught, Ozai couldn't know you were involved."

"I wasn't. And I *wouldn't* have been. Zuko was exactly where he deserved." She quirked her lips. "So were you."

"Wow," Mai said. "You are really bad at apologies."

"Excuse you, I would be *excellent* at apologies," Azula said, "if I ever had reason to give one."

"A real prodigy," Mai droned, nudging along a cleaner starfish with her foot as it tried to exfoliate her toes. It jet backwards on its arm-tails, so fast it shot from the water. Its pathetic flopping was an accurate illustration of Mai's attempts at making a point.

Ty Lee rescued the thing, scooping it back into the water. "I would forgive you," she said. "If you did apologize."

The crustacean tumble-swam back to the bottom, no better off than it had been before her help.

"You choose him," Azula said. "Enjoy your choice."

"...Okay. Well, still; thank you for coming for us," Ty Lee said again, like it meant anything for either of them.

By then her brother was on the ground with a sword at his throat, which provided ample reason to ignore her.

%%%

"You have a death wish," Suki said, eyes narrowed. "Just *apologize."*

The prince shrugged. *Shrugged.* It shifted the sand under his shoulders and jostled the sword at his throat, and she had to pull back slightly to avoid drawing blood. If she did, when she did, she wanted it to be *intentional.*

"I'm done apologizing," he repeated. "But I'm also done being an asshole, so I can promise not to burn down your village again."

"This is you *not* being an asshole?"

"I might need some practice." Another shrug. The worst part, besides his mere existence, was how *sincere* he sounded.

His sister was watching from her rocky perch, toying with a little flame on her fingers. Mai and Ty Lee were watching, too.

Suki scoffed, and lowered her sword. She didn't offer him a hand up; just walked away, leaving him sprawled on the sand. She wished he didn't look so *comfortable* there.

"How long are we staying here?" she asked, joining the tide pool viewing. A single glance was enough to tell her that Fire Nation animals had more tentacles than she was strictly comfortable with. She started to sit down next to a colorful little kitten, the only recognizably safe animal, but Mai wordlessly tugged her to a spot further away.

Everyone in their group, herself unfortunately included, looked to Azula for the answer to her question. She *was* their transport's only power source. A dependency Suki would like to rectify as soon as possible.

Azula shrugged the shrug of a girl who *could* answer, but enjoyed having the prerogative not to.

"...Right," Suki said. "We're good on food for a while, but we should find fresh water before we make any kind of dent in the supply the captain gave us."

"Most of these islands have lakes," the prince said, and swung an arm up to point at the jungle pressing up against the high tide line, and the rocky plateau beyond. "We should have a good view from those cliffs."

It wasn't a bad idea. A better idea would have been paying attention on the way down, but the landing had been a little… *abrupt.* She still wasn't sure if it was because the princess was tired, or because she'd thought it was funny.

"Who else is coming?" Suki asked.

Blank looks met her question.

"Really?" Suki sighed.

"Cliffside views have lost their appeal," the princess said.

"I can see them fine from here," Mai said.

"Two auras can harmonize better than three," Ty Lee said. "Also, I *really* need a bath."

"You and me, then," Suki said, with accurate enthusiasm.

"If it helps," the prince said, "you could push me off and no one would know."

"Well *now* they will," Suki said, unclear on if she was joking. Unclear on whether the prince was joking, either.

%%%

(Zuko didn't have a death wish. He had a trust wish; it was a lot harder.)

%%%

(It was all right for Zuzu to leave Azula's sight here, in a way it hadn't been at the prison. This wasn't the *important* part of the dream. He was only going to get water; a blink and he'd be back.)

%%

On the other side of the cliffs, a ten-ton air bison landed. His two passengers departed, also cliff-ward.

Chapter 31: W.O.U.S. (Wildlife of Unusual Size)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Appa-flight from the capital had been short, short enough to day trip Aang's way to a deeper understanding of firebenders and firebending culture, which was probably the only reason Iroh had been able to take the time off from his very busy Fire Lording to take him. Iroh had even gotten away without taking any of his guards with him, which might have been because he'd imprisoned his last guard captain and the new one was a younger woman who'd made exactly the right level of protests without actually pushing the issue.

Because, probably, Sokka had pointed out, *prison—*

So anyway, here Aang was. On the island. Just him and Sifu Fire Lord Iroh.

Tangled jungle surrounded them. Behind them, Appa was already eating his way through one particularly viney part of it.

"So," Aang said, "where are these firebending masters…?"

Iroh chuckled, and led the way.

Aang found the temple really old and impressive, and it was cool how they had to get through a million super-secret traps to get here. The way the stones clicked down as he and Iroh did the Dancing Dragon was also very satisfying, could *all* his training have immediate clicky-stone feedback? But there also continued to be, and he didn't mean to be rude, but there was a very distinct lack of—

"So…" Aang said, eyeing the statues and the wall carvings and the golden egg in the middle of an otherwise empty room, "firebending masters…?"

It was a real good thing that he trusted Sifu Iroh completely, or being taken on short notice to a mysterious island without being able to tell anyone where exactly he was going would feel exactly like one of the scarier stories that got told—had gotten told—when different groups of air nomads met up, and there was a big camp fire and a dark sky above and a ring of bison keeping them all safe in the middle, and half the fun was guessing whose tales of their travels were completely made up. Sometimes Aang caught himself thinking, *they'll never believe MY year,* and then he had to stop himself from thinking at all because—

Because no one. No one would believe him, no matter how well he told it.

No one was also how many people seemed to be on this island with them.

Iroh smiled his mysterious Sifu smile. "Continue your practice, Aang. The masters will expect you to be proficient. I will be back."

And then he stepped back out into the ancient ruins full of inexplicably well-kept traps, leaving Aang alone in the temple. His shoulders slumped as he looked at the engravings of the two men before him.

"You better not be Ran and Shaw," Aang told them, because that was *exactly* the sort of thing he could see Iroh saying. Learn from the ancient masters, right.

"Oh," Iroh said, peeking his head back in, "and do not touch the egg."

"Who would?" Aang said, gesturing with both arms at the most obvious trap of them all.

%%%

In two separate locations, the Fire siblings sneezed.

%%%

Zuko rubbed his nose with his good hand, and looked up at the cliff. The jagged cliff, with plenty of handholds.

"...I don't think I can climb that," he said.

Suki watched him, unimpressed.

"Were you expecting someone to carry you, Your Highness?"

Zuko shrugged, and winced, because shrugging was not actually advisable with fresh burns speckled up to one's collarbone. Neither had been sword fighting in the sand, but he'd thought that through about as well as volunteering to climb a cliff. Excuses were too much like apologies for him to try voicing one, though.

The Kyoshi Warrior's eyes flicked to his bandages.

"We can look for an easier way up. If we don't find one, I can always leave you alone in the middle of the jungle and climb on my own, I guess."

"Good plan," Zuko said.

"Thanks," she said, but she had the same expression for his agreement that she'd had for his injury.

%%%

So apparently there was a whole secret ancient culture living here, past the secret ancient ruins whose perfectly maintained booby traps made a lot more sense in retrospect. They were slightly unhappy to see Iroh here, or maybe they were upset about Iroh being here with *him*.

Or maybe they were just upset he was *anyone* because that was exactly who they didn't want here. Especially not someone who had promised never to tell about them.

Aang made that promise, too, and he hoped he meant it more than Iroh had, but he was so so glad Iroh *had* told him, even if Iroh didn't seem to think these people were the important part of the trip.

Aang was holding a piece of the Eternal Flame in his hands, warm and older even than the Avatar spirit, and that wasn't the important part either.

"How long have you been hiding?" he asked the Chief.

"More than a hundred years," said the Chief, who understood the real reason Aang was asking.

If the Sun Warriors could live on inside the Fire Nation itself, if *they* were still alive—

%%%

One moment, Suki had a Fire Prince behind her. The next, she had empty jungle.

"Seriously," she said to the empty jungle. A howler-toucan gave a startled shriek and flew off. "So help me if you managed to find some ancient booby trap—"

"Why would there be booby traps on a random island?" the Fire Prince asked, from behind her.

Suki made about the same noise as the howler-toucan.

"I found a cave," said the prince, his head sticking out from behind a curtain of vines.

"And you just… went in."

"...Yes?" said the prince's disembodied head. "I think there might be a hot spring in here somewhere. It's damp."

"Damp, creepy cave," Suki said, pushing aside an armful of vines to duck inside. "Great find. Good job."

"Thanks," the prince said, a little startled, like her sarcasm had been a compliment.

It was dark inside, but not *that* dark—light filtered in through the vines, and from here and there through spots on the walls. Probably a carpenter rock dove infestation.

Humidity like a steam bath wrapped around her. The prince led them further in.

%%%

Aang stood at the top of an endless flight of steps, that he'd had to climb one by one with his actual feet because Iroh had given him that *think like a firebender* look at the start, but the way it rose so high, the open air on either side with no firebender-friendly railings, the way the wind gusted through his hair and tugged at his clothes, it all felt more like something airbenders would have built.

Or maybe airbenders and firebenders together, which was a thought he was just starting to have when the stone under him rumbled and then there were *dragons*—

%%%

The cave rumbled all around them. Suki braced herself. The prince didn't.

"Earthquake," he said, with a shrug. "Small one."

"Is that normal?"

"We live on a chain of active volcanoes," he said, "so yes."

The cave was rough stone, and a little tight, and then it… wasn't. Suki slipped on the suddenly smooth ground, and slid a few feet downwards. If one of her warriors had been with her, if Mai or Ty Lee had been, there would already be a hand stretched out to help her back up. Or someone might have just steadied her from the start, before she'd hit her butt. The prince was, predictably, useless at working with anyone but him or himself. He was still standing at the opening, gawking.

"A little help?" she asked.

"This is a dragon tunnel," he said, awed in direct proportion to how useless he was being. "The scrolls say it took centuries to make them, nests would start as natural caves but each generation of young dragons would scrape through the smaller spaces as they grew and explored, their scales wearing away the stone into wider and wider tunnels. This is *amazing,* it must have taken—taken thousands of years, even adults could use these, this is like something out of stories of the Eternal Flame—"

"But dragons are extinct, right?" Because if there was one thing Suki wanted less than an earthquake while she was in here, it was meeting a *dragon.* She meant this with all due local pride, but the unagi was the only overgrown soup-noodle she needed in her life.

"...Yeah." His shoulders slumped. For the first time, he seemed to notice her on the ground. "Uh. Are you all right?"

"Apricot-peachy," she said, giving up on any offer of hands and just pushing herself up. She braced a palm on the wall as best she could, and set her feet against sliding further down. The tunnel was wide enough for her old team to walk side-by-side with room to spare, and nearly perfectly round. There was a curve to it that stopped her from seeing how far it went in either direction; for all she knew, it spiraled from the top of the cliffs down to the core of the world. Or, more likely, to whatever hot spring was coating the stone in dew-drops of steam.

They went down.

%%%

Dragons weren't extinct. Aang hadn't known they were supposed to be until Iroh reverently pointed out that these ones weren't, which was retroactively really upsetting, but here was another thing that had been hunted for a hundred years by the Fire Nation and was still here, alive, and the way they flew both drew the air to their will like fire, but also moved with the existing currents like air, until both elements were one and they were all around him and all he had to do was *move*—

The Dancing Dragon made a lot more sense up here in the sky than it had carved into stone.

He danced, and Iroh danced, and the dragons danced, and it was all four of them and the air and then the *fire,* spiraling high like life, like hope—

And then the dragons were diving back into their cliffside caves, like they'd never been here at all. Hidden but *alive.*

There was a fire in Aang's chest, and it was fed by air.

%%%

The tunnel didn't go much further down; it let out into a broad chamber, walls and floor smoothed by generations of parents coiling in their nests. Pinpricks of light shown through

the walls. Across the cave was a broad tunnel that matched the one they'd come in through, both letting out into this single chamber under the cliffs. Were dragons like fox-hares, preferring to have a back entrance on their warrens? Or did momma and dadda dragon just not like getting stuck behind each other on their way out?

The hot spring formed a shallow pool to one side, edged by round stones. Suki unslung the first of her waterskins as she knelt down. The ground was rumbling again; another earthquake.

...The stones were large. And all shaped the same. It was a shape best described as *egg*.

"This might be a stupid question," she said, "but how sure are you that dragons are extinct?"

The earthquake had a direction, best described as *towards them.* The light from the tunnel they'd used was eclipsed by something large. So was the light from the other tunnel. Shortly thereafter, there were two new light sources, best described as *tongues of fire.*

"Not very," Zuko said, as the dragons stared down at them.

Chapter End Notes

Now seems a good time to mention that I'm absolutely not following comic or Korra canon, especially with regards to certain animal companion acquisitions.

Chapter 32: Azula's Relaxing Beach Vacation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"We're going exploring," Ty Lee said, and then waited, as if this in any way required Azula's input. "...Do you want to come?"

Azula continued lounging on the tide pool's sun-soaked rocks, her eyes closed, expressing her answer in a succinctness that defied words.

"Are you tired?" Ty Lee asked, briefly blotting out Azula's sun.

"Only of your company," she replied, and could not be bothered to shoo away the girl-shaped sunshade.

She was not *tired.* She'd merely powered a hot air balloon for hours, unassisted, and had no further patience for such trivial activities as "movement" and "friendship."

"Besides," Azula said, "There's nothing more interesting on this island than me."

%%%

The blue dragon slid between them and the eggs, its body taller than Suki by a margin that would be hard to leap. Not that acrobatics would get her far—it was firmly blocking the tunnel it had entered through, while the red dragon blocked the opposite exit. Both coiled closer, tighter, until she was almost back-to-back with the prince and experiencing a vivid insight into the last thing sparrow-mice saw before peregrine-pythons squeezed.

"Zuko," she hissed, "how do we greet dragons?"

There were ceremonies for the unagi, respects to be paid each morning when their fishermen set out, things to do and not do that told the serpent *we know you and you know us—*

"Uh," the prince said. "Bow?"

"What else?" she hissed, now firmly bowed.

The prince, however, was very distinctly not taking his own advice.

"I don't mean any offense," he said, to the *dragons,* "but I'm not bowing."

A rock by her foot skittered and shook, as the bedrock itself rumbled with the force of several tons of growling lizards.

Why couldn't they have had a normal walk through the deserted island, with ancient ruins and —

%%%

"Wow," Ty Lee said, as they stood at the edge of jungle and stone. "Ancient ruins! Do you think there are traps?"

"Probably," Mai said.

There were definitely traps. Some of them, already sprung.

%%%

"We're very sorry for disturbing your eggs," Suki said. "We didn't know they were here, we mean no harm—"

"I'm not apologizing, either," Zuko added, in the interest of full disclosure.

Red and blue coils ringed them, leaving barely any space for them to stand, twining and twisting until it seemed like there was one dragon with two heads. Each of their teeth, a part of Zuko's mind noted, were easily as long as his dao. He had a very good view of them. Not yellowed and dull like those in the dragon skulls in the palace catacombs, but glistening and so very real they almost didn't feel real at all. Finding dragons, living breathing *angry* dragons, was like something out of a play—

"Zuko," Suki whisper-hissed, "what are you *doing?"*

He clasped his hands in the sign of a flame, but stayed upright. "I'm glad you're alive. It's okay if you eat us, it's important to keep your secrets—"

The air temperature around them was heating to near stifling temperatures by the dragons' mere breath. It must be nice to be that warm inside.

"We'll leave," Suki cut him off, "we won't tell anyone, will we Zuko?"

"I'll tell Azula," he said. She glared. He shrugged. "I'm not going to keep a literally world-changing secret from her."

"Because your sister is so trustworthy," Suki said, like that was something he didn't already know.

"I decided to trust her. So I have to trust her."

"That's not how trust— *ugh."* Suki let out a breath, and bowed lower. "He doesn't speak for me. My word actually *means* something."

"Words never mean anything," Zuko said, and then he had an elbow in his side and he was falling into a dragon coil and—

Oh, it was actually pretty soft. Wait, not soft. Smooth? Silky? He'd braced his hands against it to stop himself from falling over, and he maybe took longer than necessary to straighten back up, and when he did there was a giant red head bigger than his whole body glaring specifically at him. Which was a little weird, because it had been one of the blue dragon's coils he'd fallen against.

He wondered what their eggs felt like. Did they have heartbeats already? Were they moving? Would they hatch soon, and then there would be *even more* dragons in the world—

He'd dreamed of finding a dragon egg, when he was little. What Fire Nation kid *didn't.*

%%%

"Is that a *dragon* egg?" Ty Lee squealed, peering inside the temple door.

Mai, for her part, was peering at the new scuff marks in the temple's dust. "I don't know," she said, "Are dragon eggs gaudy?"

"I'm going to *steal* it," Ty Lee said, like the escaped convict she was.

%%%

"Stop trying to get them to eat us!" Suki said.

"But they should," said Zuko. "It's not like I want to die, but they shouldn't risk—"

"What is *wrong* with you? You didn't care when Mai put a knife to your throat, or I held a *sword,* and now you're trying to talk dragons into eating you, *don't you dare shrug—"*

Zuko looked her in the eye, and shrugged.

"Oh, that is *it."* Suki shoved a finger into his chest. "Do you think this only affects you? Do you think it only *matters* if it affects you? You'll get us both eaten, because *you* don't care if you die? You can burn down a whole village, and it doesn't matter because it was, what, some kind of stepping stone on the way to personal growth for you? 'Oh, I won't do it *again,* I'm not a terrible person anymore, I've *changed,'* " she mocked.

Zuko didn't think this was about the dragons anymore. "I haven't changed."

"Yeah," she said, "I've noticed."

"I haven't changed. I always—I'm not a terrible person, I was just trying to do what was right, I was trying to be good—"

"Good. Wow. I always wondered if the Fire Nation really told itself that, but here you are. So burning down my village really was good? Hunting the Avatar was good?"

The red dragon's gaze shifted back and forth between the tiny humans as they continued shouting, its mouth slowly closing. The blue one tucked its paws under its chest as it watched, much like a cat-turkey.

"You make it sound easy—"

"Well it's not *hard."*

"—But it's *not,* how do you even know what good *is?* I thought that saving our soldiers was good, but that was wrong. I thought not dueling my own father was good, but that was *really* wrong—"

"What."

"I thought completing my mission was good, but apparently trying to catch the Avatar when he's *twelve* is bad, too." Even though his father had never changed his orders, even once the Avatar's age was known, and if the Fire Lord wasn't right than who *was.*

"You are," she looked like she was groping for words, the right words, words of the appropriate strength, but she had to settle for: "literally the worst. I am glad we are getting eaten by dragons, because the world is going to be so much better without you."

Zuko couldn't help it. He started laughing.

"This is not funny," she said, and she was so *angry* about it.

"Well, you agree with my dad, so..." He shrugged. Again. "Is that good or bad? You're the expert."

"I am going to kill you," she said, not like a threat, but like a revelation, a new fact she'd realized about herself.

"Don't worry, I'm done trying to be *good.* I just screw it up and then I get punished, and I keep trying and it gets worse and worse for everyone. So I'm done, I quit, no more trying to be good."

His worst mistakes were always when he tried to do good. He was slow, but he wasn't an idiot: with enough correction, with the proper *teacher,* he could learn.

"Oh boo hoo," Suki said. "So daddy punished you by giving you a ship, and you went out and committed war crimes. And then you, what, got put in jail, like literally everyone else?"

"It— it wasn't jail, it— He put me in there to *rot,* I lost my *fire* there—"

"Right. Because Ty Lee and Mai and I were off having such a *good time* in the Boiling Rock with our lifetime imprisonments."

He drew in a sharp breath, almost choking on it, or the words, hers or his he didn't know.

"Lifetime imprisonment," he barked out, and it was almost a laugh.

"Is that funny to you?"

He really was choking on his laughter now, and he absolutely shouldn't, but he absolutely did nod. He nodded, breathless with how funny this wasn't.

The air was hot, was stifling and close-pressed, but Suki felt cold fury prickling down her spine. Well. That answered the question of whether she was joking about pushing him off a cliff or losing him in a jungle or otherwise disappearing him, because the Fire Prince was *dead.*

Zuko was still laughing, nearly doubled over, and Suki was *moving,* and then—

And then two very large heads that shouldn't have been so easy to forget were scruffing each of them by their respective shirts, and pulling them apart. The dragons loosened their coils, giving everyone a little more room to breathe, and a little more distance to cross before any murders could be attempted.

The dragons set them back down. The blue one nudged at Zuko, the same way the red was nudging at Suki, with the tip of its snout, then with its whiskers, and there were—

There were images, feelings, of fire that lived inside them and was so *warm,* of years and years of life under a sun that never changed, even as the world it touched did. The way trees were seeds then saplings then ancient, then cut down, buildings springing up in their place with new life, the death of one thing and the start of another, fires for safety and comfort and cooking and *art,* for the joy of it, patterns and colors he'd never seen in real fire until—

Until the red dragon lifted its head away from Suki, the same as the blue was lifting away from Zuko, and they tilted back their heads and breathed out *fire* .

There was so much more to it than he'd ever seen.

Fire was—

%%%

Zuzu and the Kyoshi girl had been gone awhile.

Azula, being asleep under the gloriously baking sun, neither noticed nor cared.

She *did* roll over: it was important to evenly roast your exhausted firebender.

%%%

The sun dappled in warm tones across the vines. The vines that shook, and pulled, and then a bison head was chewing through them. Ty Lee and Mai stood on the other side. Ty Lee, with an egg cuddled to her chest like a teddy bear toucan, and bits of sticky-gooey gunk on the tails of her pink coat where it hadn't quite made it through a certain shutting door as quickly as the rest of her. Mai held her hands away from her side in a state of offended disgust,

matching gunk on her arms from where she'd been shoving in rocks to *stop* the door from closing and had gotten a final splat to the face.

"Wow! You're the Avatar's bison, aren't you?" Ty Lee said.

Appa chewed. And swallowed. And growled.

"Oh, don't worry, Azula's back on the beach. And Suki's our friend now, and she's your friend, so we're friends too! Hey, do you think you could lick this stuff off?"

He could.

%%%

Zuko was crying, which was probably another thing he was doing wrong, because the dragons seemed upset about it. Or at least, he assumed that was what it meant, when their rumbling was more a purr than a growl and the blue one had her head pressed against his side, one whisker gently sending him thoughts of warmth from a life that had been longer than his entire family line.

He was sitting down and he was crying and he couldn't even get eaten by a dragon right.

"Are you having some kind of spiritual moment over there?" asked Suki, leaning back from another whisker-poke by her own dragon. "Because I admit I'm not getting the full experience."

"Fire is life," he said. "That's what they're trying to say. It's the energy to grow and… and change."

"And burn," Suki said. "And destroy."

"Yeah. They… they're dragons, they don't think like us. Dragons hunt things, they kill, but they don't— they don't murder. They don't hurt. They don't…" He swallowed, and he didn't know why he said what he said next, except that the dragon was sending him so many good things, so many simple warm *wrong* things, that it felt like he had to throw up something to make room. "He put me in a cell. In the capital prison, the same place they held my uncle. But uncle had just broken out, and I—I shot his lightning back at him, and I *missed.* He was so angry he wasn't even yelling anymore. He was just… cold.

"Azula had brought the Dai Li back from Ba Sing Se. Earthbenders. The prison is stone." He shrugged. "It was dark when I woke up, but—I've broken in and out of prisons. I figured I'd just find the door, melt the lock or pick it or something, I don't know, I don't really plan like that. So I," he held up his hand, and touched his finger tips together, miming a little flame. "But there wasn't. A door. There wasn't a door. Or a window, or—or anything. I tried to find where there were weak points, where drafts were coming in, but… there weren't. Drafts. When we were little, we caught fire-dragonflies in the garden sometimes, and mom would let us keep them in our rooms overnight as long as we made sure to—to poke air holes. Did you ever do that? Keep bugs in little glasses? They must have been terrified, but I didn't think of that—I didn't… I don't know how long air lasts. Do you?"

She didn't.

He shrugged at her silence.

"I knew it would last longer in the dark. So I…"

He broke his fingers apart, mimed his fire going out. Poof.

They'd opened his cell for food and water, he didn't know how often. There wasn't really *time* in there, that wasn't something they could just toss in. And whenever Ozai felt like gloating, which might have been the only time in Zuko's life he'd felt he could breathe *better* when his father was around. But then they'd leave again, and the stone would rumble as it closed, and he never knew how long it would be until someone came again. If Ozai was even still ordering them to, or ordering them... not to. Fire wasn't warmth or comfort, wasn't energy or light; fire burned through the very things he needed to survive.

A firebender shouldn't have to choose between their breath or their fire.

"Fire isn't life. It's death."

The blue dragon (Shaw, her name was Shaw) kept showing him things, beautiful things. Like a lot of ideas he'd had put in his head, they were wrong.

He let himself rest against her side, felt her breath and her warmth through his back, and scrubbed at his eyes. Now that he'd gotten that out, there was room for embarrassment to creep in.

"Sorry, you don't care, sorry—"

%%%

"I thought you weren't apologizing anymore," Suki said.

"Sorry," the prince said, again.

"I mean, I kind of care, because that's an objectively terrible thing to happen to someone. But if it was going to happen to anyone, I definitely care less that it happened to you, because you're also pretty awful." It was her turn to shrug.

The Fire Prince snorted. It was kind of a wet snort, because crying prince. His arms were propped loosely on his knees, his head hanging. "Yeah, I pretty much am."

"Are you going to apologize for *that?"*

"No," he said.

"Oh, I hate you so much."

But she hated him a little less like a warrior hated an enemy, and a little more like a teenager hated an even more obnoxious teenager.

He gave her a little side smirk between his arms. She could see it, by the star-speckled light holes all through the cavern walls. His prison cell could have used more carpenter rock doves.

"You act like you're trying to be a better person. *Don't* shrug." She gave him an appropriate glare. "Like you said, words don't mean anything. What have you done to actually *be* better?"

He shrugged, the asshole. "I tried to join the Avatar."

"You what?"

"That's what I was telling my dad. When he threw the lightning at me. That I was going to leave."

He said this like any part of that was a normal thing to say. Suki pinched the bridge of her nose. She didn't know where she'd picked up the gesture, but it felt extremely appropriate.

"You told him. Your father, the Fire Lord. That you were joining the Avatar."

"I… yes? He needed a firebending teacher. Or at least, I thought he did."

Which was probably another thing he'd told his dearest dad.

"You had one good idea in your life," Suki summarized, "and you screwed it up."

"Yeah?"

"You are such a shit person."

"Yeah," he said, more confidently.

She draped an arm over a dragon's giant towering head and scratched between its wiggly whiskers, because this was apparently how her day was going.

"You need to do better," she told the prince. *"Actually* better, not whatever this whole," she waved her free arm, encompassing dragons and prison breaks and whatever else he'd been up to in one movement, "this whole *this* has been."

"How do I know what's better?"

"You ask…" Someone who knew. Like his crazy sister? Or the uncle who'd apparently dethroned him? Or his dad, or the court politicians, or the Fire Nation's massive world-conquering military complex, or— "You ask me."

"I'd have to trust you, for that."

"So trust me."

He stared at her. And it was just… just such a *look,* one she wasn't even going to start unpacking, because there was a lot here already and she did *not* have the time. She wasn't sure she'd have the time, even if she had a dragon's lifespan. The Fire Prince had *issues.*

"Okay?" she pressed.

"Fuck. Okay." He roughly scrubbed the last of the tears off his face with the heels of his hands, pressing harder than was maybe necessary. "Okay."

"Okay. Then we should probably get that water before the others get worried. And maybe stop imposing on the oddly cuddly snake parents." She felt the body behind her shifting, and it should not be so easy to forget that two gigantic animals had them completely surrounded, but apparently dragons were really good listeners.

"Oh. Right," he said, which was about as coherent as anyone could expect. "Uh. Could we fill our waterskins at your spring? We won't touch the eggs, I swear. Or if you could point us towards a lake, or a stream—"

The dragons shifted aside for them to approach the water. The teenagers knelt next to the eggs, and lifted their waterskins carefully over them, and very much did not touch them.

(They *did* have heartbeats, Zuko realized. He could feel their flames, even though he couldn't feel his own.)

%%%

"Hey Azula," Ty Lee said. "Guess what we found!"

Azula cracked an eye, and stared upside-down at the offensively ornate golden egg the other girl was carrying. It looked like one of the birthday presents the war ministers would give her father each year. No one had ever accused the future Phoenix King of having good taste.

"So," another voice said, and from the forest came the Kyoshi Warrior. And her brother, standing closer to her than when they'd left, like they'd experienced some sort of *bonding*.

"Guess what we found," the warrior finished.

Azula narrowed her eyes. "Did you all have adventures without me?"

By Zuko's red eyes, his adventure had involved crying. By the way Mai was marching herself into the ocean, her clothes still on and already wet, hers had involved unnamable substances.

Azula was not jealous. But their collective impertinence was *astounding.*

Chapter End Notes

Breathe easy, folks: the best calculations I can find say Zuko was never in danger of dying from oxygen deprivation. Dehydration would have gotten him first! As I'm sure the Dai Li knew, for... reasons.

This has been the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner. <3

Chapter 33: Zuko, RE: Dragon Eggs

"Interesting that the Avatar would be here," Azula said, her gaze shifting to Zuko, "on this seemingly inconsequential island," she continued staring, quite pointedly, "which we would have had no particular reason to stop at."

"I didn't tell them," her brother said.

"When *would* he have told them?" Suki asked.

"Perhaps on a stage," Azula said, "with some sort of crowd gathered. A coronation, perhaps? Or is it only sick relative visits you announce that way?"

Her brother had flushed at her first stare, and continued to exist in that state.

"Oh," Ty Lee said, "so that's what you thought it meant. Wow, that's really literal."

"I didn't tell anyone," her brother protested. "I didn't even think of it until we were already flying."

"And yet," Azula said. "The Avatar is here. It does beg the question of why."

"Isn't it… for us?" he asked, the Dum-Dum.

"If he were looking for us, he would have found us." She waved a casual hand back to the balloon they'd arrived in. The very red balloon, laying on the very white beach sand, in no way hidden from even a casual aerial search.

"If he's not here for us, why were you implying that *I* gave us away?" He had his arms crossed. Combined with his still tear-reddened eyes, it made him look as grumpy as a komodo-rhino that had missed its dinner.

"It's not my fault that you need help thinking these things through." And also, as his sister, she was legally obligated to never let him live that down. "No, his destination was clearly elsewhere."

"Probably the village," Ty Lee said.

"The what," Azula eloquently replied.

Suki lifted an eyebrow. "Ty Lee, you could have started with that. A village nearby is kind of a big deal."

"It's not like they know we're here," Ty Lee said. "And they won't, with how bad their scouting is. We could sneak right up, we didn't even have to knock anyone out."

"It's almost like they don't expect random teenagers to be wandering around," Mai said.

"It's pretty well hidden," Ty Lee continued, "but not once you've already found the ancient ruins with footprints in their dust and the super-well-maintained traps and—"

"She was looking for more things to loot," Mai said.

Suki eyed the one thing the girl had already looted. "You're going to need to give that back, you know. It's clearly important; if there's people it belongs to..."

Ty Lee hugged her egg closer.

"Petty theft aside," Azula said, because a hundred years of imperialism had in no way instilled in her an imperative to *return* cultural artifacts, "did the Avatar bring the rest of his little team with him?"

"No," Ty Lee said, "just your uncle."

"Ty Lee," Suki and Azula said, and neither would ever admit how similar their tones were.

Zuko was staring at Ty Lee's egg. Which was a perfect replica, albeit a bit more gold-leafed, of the real eggs they'd just seen.

"The village must know about the dragons," he said. "They couldn't *not.* And—and now the Fire Nation has an airfleet, it probably flew just south of here on the day of the comet..."

"Ah," said Azula.

Suki looked between them. "What?"

Azula shrugged. "Betrayal. What other hobbies does anyone have?"

"They probably protected the dragons during Sozin's reign," Zuko explained, "and Azulon's, and Ozai's. But… but dragons that big can't hide anymore, not in a world with *airships.* If they're going to be found out anyway…"

"Then the villagers may as well sell the knowledge to the Dragon of the West," Azula finished. "It's certainly more advantageous than being found out later, and punished for it."

"Oh," Ty Lee said, still hugging her egg.

Suki was looking between all the Fire Nation teenagers now, because they clearly understood something she didn't.

"He got his title by killing a dragon," Mai said. "The last dragon, he told everyone. Fire Lords don't like to be wrong."

"Oh," Suki said. Then she paused, because something wasn't adding up. "Why would the Avatar go along with that? Aang *loves* animals. He'd ride a dragon, but he's not going to *kill* one."

"The Avatar and my dearest uncle are both in rather precarious political positions," Azula said. "The Fire Nation respects shows of power. Wheeling dragon heads bigger than most peasants' houses through the Caldera would send a certain message. However unsubtle."

Suki didn't bother hiding her disdain. "Are you saying people would respect them more if they, what, murdered the symbols of your bending and *paraded* about it?"

Azula held up both her palms, and gave a little shrug. "It worked for uncle last time. Minus the parading; apparently the corpse was a bit overdone to bring home. He only took a few scales. Had them made into a plate set for grandfather, if I recall."

Disdain elevated to disgust. "That's just… *ugh.* But it's still not something Aang would do." At least, it wasn't something the goofy kid she remembered would do. He couldn't have changed that much. She didn't want him to have changed that much. "We have to be missing something."

"It doesn't matter if we are," Zuko said. "The dragons need to know that Iroh is here. We need to warn them, get them to leave. *We* need to leave, too. Can you have the balloon ready by the time I'm back?"

Of course her brother would go off on a dragon field trip, again. And leave her behind, again. But Azula was the only one who could get them into the air, and far be it for her to discourage his first foray into proper delegation.

"You heard him," she said, turning to the others. "Get it ready."

"You could help." Suki scowled.

"I?" Azula placed a hand on her chest. "I'm your engineering crew and captain combined. Clearly I need to conserve my strength. I'm already so *very* tired. You wouldn't want my flames to slip somewhere over the ocean, would you? It would be so *very* tragic if we had to lighten our load..."

Mai hooked an arm through Suki's, and started walking them both to the balloon. Azula gave the warrior a little wave. Then she continued sun bathing, because apparently she was *not* going to have a few days on the beach to recharge.

%%%

The dragons raised their heads as Zuko tumbled back into their cave. He might have made a better impression if he hadn't literally slid down their tunnel, but it was better to get to them faster, and it wasn't like his first impression had been amazing, either.

Shaw poked her big blue snout at him, sending *concern* and *question* through her whiskers. He still wasn't sure how that worked, but he hoped it went two ways, because he was trying to send back images of Iroh, and *danger,* and *leave now.*

The blue dragon sent back a confusing acknowledgement, an impression of *yes Iroh, yes why?*

And he tried to tell them *Iroh kills dragons, he will kill you, you need to leave,* but it must have gotten tangled somehow, because all he got back was bemusement and a feeling of safety, of protection, of humans that respected them with a fervor that passed into worship (and a little view of himself and Suki as she'd seen them, young cubs that talked to them more like people than gods.)

He couldn't make her understand, every thought of *Iroh is dangerous* that he sent was gently rebuffed, by *no danger,* by *humans here are safe,* and finally by a huff of breath that blew his ponytail back and an image of how she would see someone like Iroh, who was shorter than Zuko and gray with age and one very small and alone human. A threat she could roll over in her sleep, and never even notice, if a threat he was indeed. A dismissal, a *silly cub, take a nap.*

Which seemed to be the dragon equivalent of *calm down,* but Zuko did not need to calm down and he did not need a *nap.*

Did they think they were too big to be hurt? The last dragon Iroh had killed might have thought that, too. And even if they were right, what if Iroh got hurt attacking *them?* He wasn't as young as he'd been, and—

And what if the Avatar got hurt? The kid was twelve, and the only one that the rest of the world might listen to when it came to real peace, and he would probably hesitate before any killing blow. He'd certainly hesitated when it came to Ozai. What was he going to do, take the dragon's bending away?

That was… a horrifying thought. One that he'd just apparently shared with Shaw, because she arched her neck back, breaking contact with him, a puff of flame coming from her nostrils.

Oops.

"You need to leave," he said, even though words wouldn't work any better. It wasn't like his words ever did, even with people who could understand them. "Please, you have to take your eggs and find a new place to hide."

How would they even move their eggs? Could they? Shaw's paws ended in large, heavy talons. Her legs were tiny compared to the rest of her, near-vestigial, used only for land movement and barely for that. *Could* she carry her eggs safely? Or were they stuck here until their babies hatched, chained to their nest by the kind of love that parents *should* feel for their children?

"We—we could carry them for you. We have a balloon. A balloon is, uh, it's a thing that flies. We could take them wherever you needed us to, help you protect them until you found a place. I know you don't have any reason to trust us, and you've already been so…" He didn't even know how to finish that.

He didn't have to.

The blue dragon shifted her coils. Behind her, the red dragon was, with exquisite care, nosing an egg towards Zuko. When Zuko made to step forward, closer to the nest, to help them move the rest—

Shaw slid her tail into his path. Both dragons stared down at him.

One egg. If all he could save was one egg—

He reached for it, touched its smooth-pebbled shell, felt the answering flare of heat as if the baby inside could feel him out here, the same way he could feel it inside.

He pulled his hand back, and stood.

%%%

The air ship was re-packed, their newly filled waterskins on board. The silk balloon was spread out across the sand, Mai and Suki holding its rim up to catch the heat from Azula's flames while Ty Lee made sure the breeze off the ocean didn't push any of the fabric *into* her flames. Azula had forgotten how long this part took. The balloon was filling, slowly, when Zuko came stumbling back to the beach. He looked just as shocked as the last time, if in an entirely different way.

"What happened?" Suki asked, like he was *her* brother, and she was *his* concerned sister.

"They tried to give me an egg."

"Where is it?" Ty Lee asked, peeking over the silk she was wrangling.

"It's… still there?"

"You turned them down?" Azula asked.

"How am I supposed to keep a dragon egg alive? I can barely keep *me* alive."

"You," she said, lowering her hands, "turned down a dragon egg."

It was no longer a question, and she did not wait for a reply.

"Where are you going?" her brother asked, as she walked past him.

"To get our eggs, Dum-Dum."

Azula did not know much about eggs, but she did know she'd need something to carry them in. Therefore: she grabbed a sack, and went to meet some dragons.

Chapter 34: Azula, RE: RE: Dragon Eggs

Ran and Shaw had just settled down when there came the distinct sound of *another* human in their tunnels. Ran huffed, and shoved his head under one of Shaw's blue coils. Shaw huffed back, and squeezed him out.

The human was another cub, smelling much like the last, which Shaw had dealt with. She pointedly flicked her tail at Ran's nose until he got up. This was complex dragon-language for *It's your turn.*

%%%

Azula stopped at the bottom of the tunnel, surveying the terrain. A large cavern, taken up mostly by the dragons. The pool of the hot spring, barely visible behind their bulk, the extremely regular lumps lining its side presumably the dragon eggs. Targets sighted, then.

Both dragons had already been staring at her by the time she got down—good hearing, or some other sense?—but only the red one was making any move towards her. The blue dragon was *lounging.* They, like every courtier from the time Azula was age 0 to 3, were underestimating her.

"It appears my brother forgot his egg," she said, with a smile. "And it appears *you* forgot mine. Don't worry; I'm a forgiving person by nature."

They were not immediately attacking. She'd learned early on in palace life to walk like she owned the place; the same principle applied equally well in literal dragons' dens, she assumed. She adopted a steady, unhurried stride towards the spring.

The dragons swiveled their heads, tracking her progress. The blue one began to coil more tightly as she drew nearer. The red one lowered its head, presumably to poke her with a whisker like Zuzu had reported. He'd also reported on the size of their teeth. Quite accurately. Not being even passively suicidal, Azula had no intention of allowing those near. Besides, it was cluttered enough in her head with only her.

Dragon scales were famously fire-proof. Funny: no one ever said the same about their manes.

%%%

"I should have gone after her," Zuko said, staring off into the jungle.

"No," Suki said, "you really shouldn't have."

%%%

The red dragon reared away from her flames, a shake of its head dispelling them as neatly as any firebent deflection. Both dragons stared down at her, in a manner that made her wonder about their overall intellect.

Perhaps she should try smaller words.

"Move, lizards. I'm here for your eggs, but I'm not opposed to taking the title of Dragon while I'm at it."

%%%

"So you think she'll be okay?" Zuko asked.

I didn't say that, Suki did not say. And did not have to, as at that moment a roar sent every bird in the forest flying.

%%%

It was quite simple, really. The dragons were unfathomably powerful; larger even than the legends; they were within their own nest, defending their eggs, possibly the last children of their entire race. This all led to one inescapable conclusion.

Advantage: Azula.

The red one was returning fire. The flames washed towards her, filling nearly her entire section of the cavern. Unfathomably powerful: they created a blind spot where none had previously existed. She deflected the bare minimum, letting the rest roar above her in obscuring waves. She ran low, came out on their far side, next to the blue dragon.

The blue arched its back, scrapping the cavern's roof as every titanic inch of it coiled to put itself between her and the eggs. A solid wall, and a maw that was opening with its own flames boiling over. Larger than legend: the curve of its shoulder, the hinge of its wing, was pressed as tight to the cavern's ceiling as it could without crushing its own bones, and still the space was enough for a teenage girl to vault through after a simple wall-run up a dragon's side. She slid clear to the other side, flames filling the space behind her, as she landed in a roll next to their nest.

The nest: children really were their own weakness. No wonder father despised them so.

"What a shame it would be," Azula said, "if someone were to make me drop this."

She could barely hear herself over the two snarling heads so close. Still, she trusted that the egg raised above her head sufficed in getting the point across.

"I'm going to take two of these," she said, "and then I'm going to leave. You were already going to give away one of them; while I agree that second children can be far superior, I'm sure you can console yourself with the remainder."

She kept the first egg lifted high—and, dare she say, rather precariously—on her palm. She knelt slowly, as their coils scraped rocks to crash down from the ceiling, and one-hand and one-footedly rolled a different egg into her sack.

Slowly, she stood. Eased backwards, towards the opposite tunnel from which she'd entered. It was rather the closer option. They watched her, watched the egg still balanced above her head, watched her moving farther and farther from their remaining eggs, towards a tunnel that led not to her escape, but to a world where their strength wouldn't be limited by their own home.

Azula's searching foot found the open tunnel behind her. She lowered her hand, easing the second egg into her sack, and slung it over her chest by its cord.

"Well then," she said. "Come and get me."

The moment she turned her back was the moment the blue dragon lunged for her. It got a face full of jetting flames as she stretched her palms behind her, legs braced against the time-worn stone, and flew up the smooth incline of the tunnel as literally as a human could.

She'd always enjoyed Hide and Explode. Zuzu had been good at the former; herself, the latter.

%%%

There was another roar. The entire plateau shook under their feet.

"Are the Masters okay?" Aang asked, as the Sun Warriors around them stood rooted to the spot in a way that didn't exactly say *this is normal, everything's fine.*

Which was the moment a small figure literally rocketed from the tunnels out onto the walkway above, propelled by blue flames. The Masters were not far behind.

%%%

Azula crested out into sunlight, sudden and brilliant, arching high out of the tunnel and over some sort of walkway. She landed on it, of course, tucking to roll protectively around her new eggs. Behind her, the blue dragon surged from its tunnel in a continuous line, impossibly long now that it was out in the open. It roared again as the sun struck its face; dragons were largely fireproof, but their eyes did not appreciate this being tested. Across from them, at the walkway's other end, the red dragon emerged with its own roar.

Their wings snapped open. They circled the walkway, tight breakneck loops that nearly blew Azula over by the sheer wind they created. She braced against the buffeting, readied for their first attack—

It came. She lunged low, the blue dragon nearly forcing her to her knees as it swooped at her. She rose again, arms stretched to either side, ready for whichever direction their flames would come. The red dragon came this time, the scales of its underbelly nearly brushing her shoulder, forcing her to pivot to the side. They swooped, again and again. No flames yet, they were *playing* with her—

There was a rhythm to their movements that was as undeniable as it was baffling. She adjusted to them as she would have to father's training strikes; get out of the way, get *better,* or be battered down. Her pivots became something smooth as she kept her guard up between the both of them. The placement of her feet became precise, grounding her against the steady torrent of their wind. Her lunges, the placement of her hands, were foregone conclusions as she stayed readied for their flames.

She'd learned harder katas faster, and under far more duress than a few flying lizards. They wanted to play? She could play. She kept the steps and turns they'd herded her into, but her arms—

Her arms swept in well-practiced circles. It felt *right* with these movements, like a modification to a set, a progression from a beginner's stance to the advanced form. Electricity crackled around her. The blue dragon dove for her. Azula aimed, let loose, *struck,* right between its already irritated eyes.

Lightning lit the dragon's mane, surged between its horns. The blue dragon continued its dive as smoothly as before, and the lightning flowed down its spine like it was a living bolt. The dragon arced back up, twisted, and the bolt crackled in the air between it and its partner. The red dragon caught it, swooped, built the bolt up over the length of its own body as the blue had done, crested back up—

And then the bolt was being passed back to *her,* magnified by two colossal snakes that needed a better hobby than *lightning dancing.*

It went down the length of her arm, through her navel, and out her extended fingers, uncle's trick fitting smoothly into the kata as if it belonged.

The blue dragon caught the bolt, and swooped down again. Passed it to the red dragon. The red passed it back to Azula. It built each time, until every hair on her body felt like it was ready to float, or crackle, or cause severe damage to the next person who dared touch her.

The dragons glittered with seed lightning even when it wasn't their turn, until it was hard to tell which of them was holding the bolt, until there *was* no singular bolt, only a live wire running between the three of them and the longer they held it the less they could afford to, this was *death* they had racing through them, but the way it lit up every nerve in her body had never felt so *alive*—

Azula cackled. Which was not actually a wise thing to do, from the standpoint of breath control, particularly not while half-electrocuted. Her heart seized in a manner she suspected would be quite familiar to Zuko as she fumbled a step, a hair off from perfect, the energy allowed to fester in her a moment instead of smoothly flowing through, and oh, if this killed her she was going to *murder* someone—

The dragons touched down on either side of her. She didn't see what they did; she was rather too busy choking, and falling to her knees. But there was a decided *boom* as all that lightning was grounded away from her and into the stone.

She coughed, and glared up at them from between her rather unkempt hair. Which was, of course, when they had the audacity to *breathe fire* at her.

Spiraling high, its every fleck of color giving show to its impurities and imperfections, father would have half-immolated her and sicced her on a twelve year old if she'd bent anywhere near as sloppy as this, their flames completely missing her, the fools.

She was hunched over by the time they finished, breathing hard, her vision blurring. Tears from the heat, of course; a reflex. She flinched as a whisker brushed her cheek, a lightning tingle crackling between them and leaving her somehow *more* grounded. Then something brushed her *mind,* as if they could make any better sense of what was inside, good luck *there.*

The whisker left her.

And then they flew back into their tunnels, leaving her kneeling on the walkway. Which was an extremely rude state to leave one's dance partner in. She drew in a shaky breath, her lungs expanding, and it felt like the fullest breath of her life.

"You forgot your eggs," she shouted, "you *Dum-Dums."*

%%%

"...Did Azula just say she has a dragon egg?" Aang asked, squinting through the after image of lightning in his eyes. *Lots* of lightning. He was really, really glad that wasn't how *his* dragon dance had gone.

"More than one, I believe," said Fire Lord Iroh, sounding faint.

Chapter 35: Air Is Freedom

Zuko started running at the first roar. When the cloudless clifftop developed a *dragon-filled lightning storm,* he ran faster. He reached the cave just in time to find a wall of moving red scales blocking his way into the tunnel. And they kept blocking his way. For awhile, while he bounced on his heels and his new burns stung from sweat and the adrenaline made everything seem to move even *slower.* Dragons were really, really,

really, *really,*

really long.

Finally, *finally,* its tufted tail slipped past. Zuko leaned into the tunnel, and called down.

"Excuse me. Is my sister with you?"

The red dragon, after a slithering-scrapping pause where it was presumably turning its whole body around, stuck its head back into the tunnel below. And let it thump-drop against the stone as it stared up at him. It looked… tired, maybe?

"Is… that a no?"

It raised one whisker and pointed, laconically, further up the tunnel.

"Okay. Uh. Thanks?"

The dragon slid back out of sight. Zuko started climbing. It got steeper and steeper, until he was scrabble-climbing in a way that probably wasn't the best for his new injuries, or the newer bruises he was acquiring on his knees. And then it got *steeper,* and he was sliding back

down almost as fast as he was climbing up, but *almost* meant he would still make it if he just *kept trying—*

There was a huff behind him. And then a very large blue nose was under his legs, pushing him up and out the last few feet into the sunlight.

He would have said thanks, but his sister was kneeling in the center of some weird walkway and she was *crying,* so he hit the ground running instead.

"Azula! Are you all right?" He stopped short of touching her, but well within big-brother-fretting distance.

She did not look all right, but she didn't *not* look all right. She was a little singed at the edges, and her hair was a wind-blown staticy mess he wasn't going to comment on because he might have lost his fear of death but he hadn't lost his fear of sisters, but he didn't see anything seriously wrong. She was taking in shaky breaths, and hugging a bag with two suspiciously dragon-egg-sized lumps inside. Which was *another* thing he wasn't going to touch, just more metaphorically.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, which was a less complicated question than *are you all right.* "We should go before anyone realizes we're—"

The Avatar landed next to him. Because of course he did.

%%%

Aang had done some wooshy air-assisted running up the ridiculously long staircase, which maybe he shouldn't have, because now Sifu Iroh was pretty far down the steps behind him and Zuko was slipping into a bending stance in front of him. Which, pro: maybe Zuko had his bending back! Seeing dragons should have been good for that, right? But, con: maybe Zuko had his bending back. And Aang was right next to him and Azula, and the last time that had happened had been in Ba Sing Se. Which had, um. Not gone the *greatest.*

Zuko was slipping into a *defensive* stance. And Azula still hadn't gotten up.

Aang settled into a loose defensive stance of his own. Just in case. "You, uh. You don't look so good."

"Which of us?" Zuko asked, frowning.

Aang's gaze flicked between them. "Uh."

Azula laughed. It was a short, sharp sound, and maybe not actually due to anything funny. Even though she was grinning at him now, like he'd made the best joke, or she was going to eat him. Or both.

Aang shifted towards a more fleeing-ready stance. "Did the dragons give you eggs?"

Her smile dropped into an affronted scowl. "No, I *took* them."

"Right," he said, drawing the sound out.

He could hear Iroh on the stairs behind them, coming closer and closer. And he was apparently in shouting range.

"Zuko!"

%%%

Zuko shifted his stance towards Iroh, even though Avatar Aang was closer, and felt himself tense up in exactly the way he shouldn't before a fight. His heart was doing a thing in his chest, beating so fast it made it hard to breathe, and it was weird that even with how bad it

felt it was still *better* than before Uncle had dethroned him and held him down and made Katara fix him. He didn't like it, this actual physical feeling that Uncle had been *right.* It made him sick in a way he couldn't get out, it was inside him, and he couldn't be thinking of this right now because Unc— Because Iroh was almost up the stairs, and Shaw still had her head poking out of a tunnel watching them all, and Iroh *killed dragons.*

"Stop," Zuko shouted, and… and Uncle did, he stopped on the steps, his hands raised like he was trying to soothe an animal or hug a nephew or—

"Stop," Zuko said again, drawing himself up. If he could stand between Azula's fire and a guard at the Boiling Rock, he could stand between Iroh and the dragons here. "You can't do this."

"Zuko—" Uncle started.

"They're not animals, they're not some symbol of power for you to kill, they're *people.* They're firebenders. Like—" like us, except not like him, not anymore. "They're *our* people. Sozin was wrong to start the hunts, and Azulon was wrong to let them continue. You have a chance to *stop* it, you're the Fire Lord now—"

"Wait," Avatar Aang said, "you think Iroh came to kill them?"

"He has before," Zuko said.

"Oh," the Avatar smiled, like he was relieved, and dropped his defensive stance entirely, "No he hasn't! That's just what he told everyone so they'd leave the Masters alone. We just came to dance!"

"To dance," Zuko echoed.

"Yeah, like Azula." The boy grimaced. "...Maybe not *exactly* like Azula."

"Don't be jealous," Azula said. And she was still kneeling there, still hugging her eggs, and Zuko was getting a little more worried about how much of that lightning had hit her. But he couldn't actually focus on that right now, because the Avatar was still here and Iroh was still there and he had to keep looking between them, because it was getting harder to remember where *he* was, because there was a rising white noise in his ears that sounded a lot like going numb.

"You... didn't kill a dragon," he said, to Iroh.

Iroh was still on the stairs, still catching his breath from the run up. It must be nice to be able to take full breaths.

"No nephew," he said. "I did not. I *would* not."

"You only *told* me you did," Zuko said.

"Zuko," the Avatar said, "wait—"

Oh. He'd been moving, taking a step back, like he had some kind of plan for what came after that. He *needed* a plan for what came after that. If Iroh wasn't here to kill the dragons, if he was just here to… what, *dance* with them? What did that even…?

If Iroh wasn't here to hurt them, then the dragons were just more people who didn't need Zuko's help to be rescued. Which… meant he could just go. He took in a breath, and let it out, and worked on feeling his arms and legs and the pounding of his heart again. He dropped out of his stance. Stood up straight, and smoothed out his expression, and faced them like a former Fire Lord. He locked eyes with the Avatar.

"My sister and I were just leaving. What cause do you have to detain us? Or does the Avatar obey the Fire Lord's orders?" He let his face twist into a sneer, like a former Fire *Prince.* "That would have been useful for my father to know."

"I—I'm not trying to *detain* you," Avatar Aang said, waving his hands. "I just said to *wait…"*

"Zuko, please," Iroh said, "can we talk?"

"You can talk from there," Azula snapped. Because yeah, Iroh's foot had crept up another step, like he couldn't physically stop himself from ignoring Zuko's wishes—

(Like he cared so much he couldn't stop himself from getting closer—)

Zuko didn't answer. Which was the only answer he had in him to give.

"Zuko," Iroh said. "Azula. You must realize what you started, when you left."

Azula laughed. Whether about being included in Iroh's words for once, or because her brother very much *hadn't* realized the civil war he'd started until he'd had it spelled out for him, Zuko didn't know.

"I know I am not… I have not been good, for either of you. There is so much more I could have, should have—" Uncle closed his eyes, and drew in a breath. "I am worried for you. For both of you. I think… you need help, even if it is too much to ask that you accept mine. There are other estates you could stay at, if you cannot bear to be in the palace; our family owns land all over the nation. You could go as far as you'd like, anywhere you'd like. But you need doctors, you need to *heal,* and I fear that if you continue this…"

He did not seem to know how to finish that thought, did not know what *this* was. To be fair, neither did Zuko. But Iroh wasn't done talking.

"I know you did not mean to start a war, Zuko. I have had time to review your rulings, everything you did to stop the war, to bring peace to our people and the world. But there are people who *want* war, people in our own military and the other nations who will restart the

hundred year war, others who would see us torn apart from the inside. There are those who would use you and your sister—"

"We're leaving," Zuko interrupted. "We're not trying to start a civil war. I'm not going to lead people against you. We're just… leaving."

"That may not be a choice people give you," Iroh said.

"How would that be any different than with you?" Zuko said.

Azula snorted. She was finally standing, almost lazily, making a show of her lack of concern. Avatar Aang was moving his gaze back and forth between them all, and very much looking like he didn't want to be in the middle of this. Iroh was… not saying anything. For once.

"You didn't tell me that dragons were still alive," Zuko said. "Why not?"

Uncle stayed silent.

"Yeah," Zuko said. "That's how I feel about you, too."

"If you come back," Avatar Aang put in, hesitantly, "you can help rebuild. I know you care."

He did care. He *couldn't* care. "Are you going to stop us?"

"No," the Avatar said.

Zuko nodded to him, as close to a bow as he could come. Then he turned his head back to Iroh.

"If you can't trust me to make decisions away from your sight," Zuko said, "how could you have ever trusted me as your heir? As Fire Lord? If you're serious about… About anything. If you actually care. Then try trusting me, for once in your life, and maybe I'll try trusting *you* again."

"Zuko, please," Iroh said, and he was creeping up the stairs again, he was almost to the top.

"You know what we have that you don't?" Azula said, hooking her arm through Zuko's, and grinning down at the Fire Lord. Zuko started to frown, because he didn't know how dragon eggs were any help right now, even though that was the obvious answer—

"Long legs," she said.

And then she was running towards the other tunnel, the one without a dragon head sticking out, and she was dragging him with her, and her laughter was bright as lightning.

Iroh raced the last distance up. He wasn't fast enough. Shaw snaked out of her tunnel to settle on the walkway between them, and Azula and Zuko were in the other tunnel, which had been a pain to go *up* but on the way down was just a giant dragon-made slide, and—

Zuko was laughing too. Which probably wouldn't make Uncle think he needed doctors any less, but he didn't have to care what the Fire Lord thought anymore.

%%%

Aang didn't do anything to stop them. He didn't *want* to stop them. Up here, between the dragon's peaks, he could feel the wind tugging at him, and the way it tugged at his inner flame, too.

Fire was life. Air was freedom. But being the Avatar, that was duty. There was only one Avatar in the whole world, and he'd run away once, he *couldn't* again. But maybe Zuko could. Aang didn't think so, but maybe. As long as he didn't get trapped in ice, it would probably be fine.

The blue dragon was standing in Iroh's way, its body draped loosely over the walkway. But it wasn't Iroh it was looking at. It lowered its head, and reached out a whisker towards him. *She* reached out a whisker towards him.

We will speak, Avatar, Sifu Shaw said, with a feeling in his mind like scruffing a cub.

Chapter 36: Interlude: Breadcrumbs 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Are we leaving?" Suki asked, as two panting, smiling ex-Fire-Lords came stumbling out of the tree line.

"No," Azula said, futilely swiping her incredibly staticy hair from her face. "I'm bathing, and then I'm *napping."*

There were reasons for this. Good, solid tactical reasons, like her fire being more effective at providing lift to their balloon through the colder air of the night, and darkness preventing their uncle from getting a heading on them. As long as the Avatar and his air-support-bison didn't assist, it was unlikely their uncle would find them in any timely manner.

There *were* reasons for this. There was also the fact she was sweaty and tired, and unopposed to throwing around more lightning if their uncle *did* find them.

"Zuko, take our eggs. Do *not* let Ty Lee talk you into letting her hold them. Three is enough for juggling."

"Aww, Azula, I *wouldn't—"*

%%%

Shaw spoke with him. Aang wasn't sure he understood everything. She was asking about… about warmth-that-wasn't? A bed of coals, and it couldn't rekindle, because someone had scraped it out. But not a real bed of coals, coals that were *inside—*

"Oh," he said. And he didn't really mean to think about it with her—not that he meant to hide it!—but he remembered Ozai, and how it felt to take his bending, the way their chi had

fought back and forth between them, until Aang's had won, had scorched through every path and left nothing that *could* burn.

The blue dragon broke whisker contact. She stared down at him, for one breath. Two. Really long breaths, dragons had *huge* lungs. And Aang was just starting to fidget and wonder if maybe a dragon wouldn't like that he *could* do what he'd done, when her whisker brushed his face again.

Stay, she said, or he thought she said, *Teach you.*

What she'd actually definitely said had been the sense of a dragon cub not knowing its own strength, of biting toys it didn't necessarily mean to break. It wasn't disapproval. He didn't get the impression she *cared* that Ozai was… was the way he was, now. But she cared that Aang had learned something new and devastating and then immediately used it.

Teach you better than a turtle, she said, with a sense of thousands of years of a very particular rivalry against *turtles.*

"Wait, do you know the lion-turtle?" Aang asked.

She sent back a longing for roast turtle, cooked in the shell. He got the impression it was a joke. …It was probably a joke.

"I can't really stay to learn," Aang said. "There's a lot I have to do. The world needs me."

She took in another few contemplative breaths while staring down at him. Then she turned away, and dove back down into the tunnel behind her. Which was… confusing. Maybe he hadn't understood the "teach you" part?

Iroh was still standing on the walkway. He was staring out over the jungle behind the cliff, like he could see where Zuko and Azula had gone without help from Appa. Which Aang wasn't going to give, *couldn't* give, because it really wasn't any fun being chased around the

world on the orders of a Fire Lord. But he could maybe offer a shorter, less capture-the-nephew-y ride.

"Do you… want a lift back down?" he asked.

"No, Avatar Aang," Iroh said. "I think I will just… stay here, a moment."

%%%

Ran shifted his coils when Shaw returned, making room for her on stone he'd pre-heated. She twined over and around him gratefully, and tucked her head under his chin. Her whiskers twined in his.

His mate was always at her most affectionate moments before she ruined his day.

%%%

When they left the island, a blue dragon rose to follow them.

In the cave under the cliffs, an egg twitched. Just barely twitched. It *might* have twitched. Ran stared at it with the abject horror of a parent left alone with the kids.

%%%

"Chief," a Sun Warrior said, dashing into the courtyard. "The Sunstone, it's gone!"

The trail of goopy footprints led from the temple directly to a clearing in the jungle that the Avatar's bison had mowed down.

The chief pinched the bridge of his nose: a truly ancient technique for warding off the Spirits of Migraine.

"Master Shaw knows what she is doing," he decided, because it was either that, or they would have to follow the Avatar back to the monarchy's festering heart.

Shaw, having no idea the so-called Sunstone was gone, flew on.

%%%

So did Ty Lee. In a rather different direction.

"This egg has *such* a pretty aura," she said.

"It, uh," Suki began, diplomatically, "doesn't look like the other dragon eggs."

"I know," Ty Lee said, her cheek pressed against the stone, "exciting, isn't it?"

Five-year-old Suki had spent a whole summer carrying around a rock and telling everyone it was an Unagi egg.

"It sure is," fifteen-year-old Suki agreed, because friends didn't point out that friends were cuddling painted rocks. Like her momma had said: at least it was strength training.

%%%

The Fire Lord, the Avatar, and a dragon landed at the palace.

Exclamations followed. So did proclamations. Dragon hunting was forbidden, on pain of nine familial exterminations. Certain uninhabited islands throughout the Fire Nation were hereby set aside as their breeding grounds, in the hopes any remaining dragons would accept these offerings and return to bless their nation.

The dragon herself was very large, such that her body draped over roofs and through courtyards throughout the palace. This was a much more immediate discouragement to hunting.

The palace laborers worked for a day and night clearing enough stone for her to enter the tunnels that honeycombed the Caldera, and served as the traditional suites for large, scaly royal advisors.

Shaw slid into them with great contentment. It had been quite some time since she'd had a proper magma molt—

The great dragon blinked.

The Dai Li agents blinked back.

"...I think we need a new place to hide," Apprentice Shenji said, faintly.

His superior officers agreed.

%%%

Having once commanded one of the Fire Nation's single largest army endeavours, with all its attendant paperwork, it was with only mild surprise that Iroh beheld the work that had piled up in a single day of the Fire Lord's absence.

The White Lotus were pressing for peace talks, preferably yesterday. None of his fellow grandmasters agreed on the location it should take place, but all agreed "not the Fire Nation." They could nudge their respective leaders to attend such talks, now that they knew there was a reasonable Fire Lord to talk *to,* but only on more neutral grounds.

"We could do it in the south," Sokka said, as he sat sideways on a chair in front of Iroh's desk, casually reading through the less demanding paperwork. "You've already released our war chief; send dad back ahead of the talks with all our prisoners of war, and you'll probably have less casual assasination attempts than in any other nation. Plus, it would give you an excuse to scoochie-scooch a few early rebuilding resources our way. Can't have the Fire Lord's entourage staying in snowy squallor."

Not that there would be much snow, since by the time all this was organized it would probably be summer at the South Pole. And not that there would be much squallor, because with the other half of their population returned, and *peace,* they could actually rebuild all those things Sokka had been told about. He wanted communal spaces. He wanted a *men's lodge,* where the village boys could go… and get taught manly things… by men. Who were right there in the village to teach them, and knew the best way to patch a canoe or build a whole new one, who knew dances and songs and stories, who weren't just one teenager trying to wrangle toddlers into proper watch rotations between potty breaks.

"You should send back any Water Tribe scrolls the palace has, too," Katara put in, because his little sister was a genius. "And scrimshaw carvings, and anything else that was stolen from us. It would be a more meaningful first reparation than money, and show that you're working to return the rest that your people stole."

Iroh stroked his beard. "Much of that is in the Royal Caldera Museum. I will need to speak with the curators on which exhibits can be moved safely."

"All of them," Katara said, with a certain stole-from-pirates-and-will-steal-again edge, "if it was *safe* to move them out of our homes then it's *safe* to move them back."

There was a knock on the door, followed by a guard announcing the arrival of a clerk, followed by the clerk bowing low while offering a neatly bound document folio with both hands.

"The records Fire Lo— Prince Zu— The records that the Water Tribe Ambassador requested, concerning," the man's face screwed up, as if quoting something he had read often and with growing frustration, "All Water Tribe imprisonments ever, that of the Kyoshi Warriors, and those from the capital invasion. We thought there might still be some interest in them, if it pleases your Majesty."

"Oh, there is *definitely* some interest," Sokka said, reaching for them.

The clerk's eyes flicked up to Iroh briefly; Iroh inclined his head, and the young man allowed Sokka to take his papers from him.

"Thank you for continuing the work," Iroh said. "It is safe to assume that most projects my nephew ordered are still of relevance. If you are ever unsure, please do not hesitate to ask."

The clerk murmured his understanding and, with a final bow, he exited, the guard shutting the door behind him.

The clerks truly were much more diligent than Iroh remembered; perhaps the staff had turned over in his absence, or perhaps he had simply never noticed how rapidly they responded to requests. It was not something he had concerned himself with as a prince, so long as the reports were there when needed. Years assisting Zuko with the bureaucracy of maintaining a ship while out of the current Fire Lord's favor had left Iroh more appreciative of such things.

Sokka clutched the papers to his chest, taking in a deep breath before diving in. Iroh chuckled, returning to his own work. There was a comfortable silence in his office. Toph was lounging on the floor in one corner, her hands behind her head, giving them only one foot's worth of attention as her other toes explored the carved woodwork around her. Katara had shifted closer, joining her brother in combing the records for familiar faces. Avatar Aang was sitting on the floor, a thick old book he had picked up somewhere in his lap as he paged through it.

Iroh picked up his next missive. Ah yes: the Northern Water Tribe was testing how permissive their borders now were. The Northern Admiral requested permission to pursue and/or attack encroaching ships. Iroh sighed, and began penning another letter to Pakku.

He reached a certain other request around the same time Sokka was staring at a name on one of his lists.

"What's got you two so worked up?" asked Toph.

"It appears one of our southern villages has sent an urgent request for a judge," Iroh said.

"That doesn't seem like something a Fire Lord needs to approve," Toph said.

"Yes, well. The accused is a Southern Tribeswoman."

Katara gasped, her reading catching up to what Sokka had already seen.

"Hama," he said, looking up from his list.

There was a collective pause amongst the children. Iroh had not been with them at the time, but he had certainly heard the stories. And the nightmares.

"I kind of assumed they killed her as soon as we left," Toph said.

"Toph," said Aang.

Their youngest, and occasionally most vicious member, gave a shrug.

"I presume my judicial officers are trying to avoid an international incident by elevating the request," Iroh said. And added, with a wry smile: "Or they are trying to drown me in minutia."

"She's not *minutia,"* Katara said.

"My apologies," Iroh said.

"And you can't try our people."

That gave him more of a pause. "'It was my citizens she was preying upon," he began, delicately, "Would you have the Fire Nation try Ozai, when his greatest crimes were committed elsewhere?"

"That's not the same," Katara said.

"Well this is a great preview of the peace talks," Toph said, propping her spare foot up on Aang's shoulder.

%%%

But Aang was looking at the prison rolls. Years and years of sedition and treason that had ended in the Boiling Rock, with neatly penned descriptions like *Defied officer orders* and *Found to be preserving Air Army propaganda.*

People who had said no, and what it had gotten them.

Executed by hanging

Executed by fire

Deceased (illness)

Deceased (injury)

Transferred to Haimoto Labor Reform Camp

They weren't all dead. Especially in the early pages, there were people still alive, the final column in their entry left empty. There were even a few marked *Released.*

Sometimes Aang wished he could go back in time, or at least know what had happened to all his friends, all the people he'd known. This was like doing that, but in the worst way possible.

Bhasundara of Koyama Village

Treason

She'd been in her twenties the last time Aang had seen her, a sister at the Eastern Air Temple, whispering to the other nuns about the Fire Nation boy she was going to marry. He'd heard her while he was hanging upside-down from a balcony above.

And then he and the other boys had thrown their pies, and he'd run-flown as fast as he could but he'd still ended up with more pie filling down the back of his shirt than he thought they'd even thrown.

The monks always cautioned them against young nuns on these inter-temple visits, and he didn't think that was why, but it definitely *should* have been.

Executed by fire

Aang wasn't sure about every entry that seemed familiar. They were just names and hometowns; lots of people shared names and hometowns.

Keiko of Sakurajima might have been the craftswoman who'd shown him how to blow glass, on an afternoon when Gyatso was visiting with his Fire Sage friends. Her family had passed down all the ways to do so with firebending, but Keiko was a nonbender, which Aang hadn't even known until she was done with the fire lily they'd made together. (Aang had done one of the leaves. She'd said asymmetry was the point of having three, which had been a nice way of describing how his had turned out.)

Yuji of Fukushima might have been the vendor that made the absolute *worst* takoyaki he'd ever had, the balls had been so drippy with undercooked dough that the octopus-roaches had still been trying to crawl out, he'd ordered them vegetarian they weren't even supposed to *have* octopuses in them, nevermind octopus-*roaches*, it had been so gross that he'd brought them along to show to—

His gaze stopped on the page. It wasn't a remarkable page. Just somewhere in the last pages of the book, in the handwriting of the first warden who'd started this ledger.

"Kuzon," he breathed.

"The Fire Nation made her that way," Katara was arguing. "She wasn't locking people in caves to starve when she lived in the south. Your nation did this to her; they don't get to judge her for it, too."

Kuzon of Fushimi

He'd been sentenced fifty years ago. He would have been… sixty-one? Sixty-two? Which would have sounded really old to Aang before the iceberg, but now he'd meet Bumi, who was over a hundred, so sixty-one or sixty-two was over half-way to them being able to meet again —

"We don't actually know that." Sokka raised his hands in preemptive surrender. "I mean, probably she wasn't, but just pointing that out. We should really talk to the elders about

anyone who might have been *disappeared by the spirits* back then. And she definitely *does* do that now, so are we sure we want to bring her and her murder-caving hobby home with us, even for a trial? We are a little short on people who can stop her if she decides to start up again."

Aiding and abetting Air Nomad terrorists

He'd spent fifty years protecting Aang's people.

"You say something, Twinkletoes?" Toph asked.

Aang's people had still been here to help, fifty years ago.

"I'm going to go meditate for a while," he said, closing the ledger. He suddenly needed to feel the sun, in a way he hadn't ever before.

Execution by darkness

He didn't know exactly what that was. But he thought he could guess.

"You have actual war criminals in need of trials," Katara said. "Hama is just… just a twisted old woman, she's not *evil."*

"She was pretty evil," Sokka said.

"As evil as the man who killed mom? Hama is going to get a trial before *him?"*

"Please tell me more about this man," the Fire Lord said, as Aang slipped out the door, to where the air moved and the sun shone and a dragon head was peeking out of a tunnel not so

far away.

"Can I see the rainbow fire again, Sifu Shaw?" he asked.

Not see, she said, raising up. *Teach.*

%%%

(Shaw was politely giving her tunnel-mates time to move out, anyway.)

%%%

Kuzon would have really, really loved this.

%%%

"That's pretty," Suki said, leaning back against a rail.

Azula clenched her fist, snuffing the colored fire she'd been using. When she lit a flame again, it was her regular blue.

"It's imperfect," she scoffed.

"Imperfections sure are pretty," Ty Lee said.

%%%

There were storm clouds to the north of them, a great gray mass rapidly blowing west. They'd watched them draw closer largely in silence, with varying levels of dread for what a storm would do to their balloon, but it looked like they'd lucked out; whatever winds were driving them were far enough away and high enough up that they weren't being affected at all. It looked like the typhoon season had begun.

"I think I recognize those clouds," Zuko said.

"Do you have a fever?" Suki asked, because someone had to. But Ty Lee was napping with her chin on top of her rock, and Mai and Azula weren't about to.

"They tried to kill my helmsman," Zuko said, squinting suspiciously at the sky, which was indeed an answer.

%%%

Somewhere to the south, a stolen Fire Navy ship sailed. Chit Sang was a former navy man, and Ju-An the playwright had done extensive research on naval ships for a play he hadn't actually written, and between them they'd managed to stop any of the other Boiling Rock escapees from sinking them.

Questions remained. Where were they going? What would they do with their newfound freedom? How long could they keep it?

And, most important of all, and currently being decided by blind ballots dropped into an old lard tin in the mess hall: what would they name their ship?

They did not know it then, but history would mark this as the maiden voyage of the *Freed Press*.

%%%

Ukano, father of Mai, former governor of New Ozai, current interim governor of Gaipan, received two letters from Caldera.

The first bore the Fire Lord's seal—Fire Lord Iroh, it bore specifying—and was of course opened with all due haste.

As his colony was new, and poorly integrated, and a frequent target of local terrorists (see: the flooding that had opened this position's vacancy) (read: the former governor had been recalled to Fire Lord Ozai's court, and had never returned), it was Fire Lord Iroh's desire that he begin the process of preparing his Fire Nation citizens for repatriation.

The second letter was from his brother, the Warden of the Boiling Rock. Former warden. He wished to relay that former convict Mai had been broken out of prison by former Fire Lords Zuko and Azula. How tragic for their family to be so out of favor with the current Fire Lord.

How easy to append "former" to the title of anyone, royalty included.

Governor Ukano received two letters. He sent out many more than that.

%%%

Aang woke the next morning with the rising sun, and felt warm inside in a way he was only beginning to understand.

%%%

Zuko, curled around two dragon eggs, slept in. This was in spite of the foot prodding him.

"Land, Zuko. Tell me where on this coastline we are."

"You think he has it memorized?" Mai asked.

"What else was he doing for three years? Hunting the Avatar?"

"His fever's worse," Suki said, and there was a hand on his forehead, which was not and had never been a good reason to wake up. Zuko grumbled, and—very carefully—turned over.

"Well, at least he's keeping the eggs warm. Good job, Zuzu: you always find the most useful ways to be useless."

"How about we just land, and see where we are?" Suki said. "It's not like either the Earth Kingdom *or* the colonies are a great option for you. And he needs a healer for those burns."

%%%

Elsewhere, a certain healer's apprentice woke up at a perfectly reasonable, non-Firebending-related hour. She had a good feeling about today.

She'd had a good feeling the day her ostrich-horse got stolen, too.

Chapter End Notes

All due credit to GadfeatherSnowrose, whose comment inspired the Kuzon's-name-in-a-ledger moment, and to Carolofthebell, who was delighted to realize where Ty Lee and Mai's goopy trail of thievery would lead. As was I.

Chapter 37: Choose Kindness

Song woke up with a good feeling, because waking up feeling good was a choice. Everyday, in everything: she could choose to feel good. She could choose to be kind.

She went to the stable, first. They hadn't replaced their ostrich horse yet, which was good, because there would hardly be space for one now. Not with the two komodo-rhinos currently sharing their single stall. At least they were still young cows.

"Good morning, sweethearts. How are you?"

She rubbed behind their ears, she checked their feet for stones, she coaxed them into the yard with fresh feed and mucked their stall. At least there were only the two of them; their nearest neighbors had a stable meant for five. They didn't have their ostrich-horses anymore, either.

But those weren't Helping Thoughts. Those were the kind of thoughts that simmered until they boiled, overflowed, needed to be stirred back down and capped off nice and tight with a good, sturdy lid.

Song put down fresh straw, and smiled, and patted two very blameless ladies on her way out as they nuzzled her for treats.

"Apple-granate season is over, sweethearts, I'm sorry," she said.

"Aren't you done with that yet?" a voice called from the porch.

Song took in a deep breath. Then she turned with a smile, and a polite bow. "I'll be right in, sir."

“Earth Kingdom peasants waste so much time in the mornings,” the man said, as she went past him. It was the only way into the house. The only way without going a very long, very obvious way around, at least.

“I would sleep in, too, if you let me,” his friend said, with a shrug. “Not everyone hates sleep as much as a firebender.”

“I do not hate sleep, I just go to bed at a reasonable—”

“Uh-huh,” his friend interrupted, his eyes on her. “Hey, could you draw a bath? When you get the chance.”

“Of course, sir,” she said, with another bow, and entered the house. Her house. It had taken so long for it to feel like home, after they’d come here from another town where soldiers were quartered among the houses, after *that* home stopped being—

She went into the house.

Her mother made room for her at the wash basin, and together they scrubbed the morning’s dishes. After Song set the first pot of water on to boil, of course. In between bites of her own breakfast, of course. She scrubbed, and dried, and set pot after pot on to boil as the tub grew fuller behind its modesty screen.

“This is taking forever,” the first soldier complained, from the porch.

“Do it yourself, then.”

“Fine.”

And he came in and dumped the rest of the water into the tub, and stuck his hand in. And it was the perfect temperature, just like that. Song smiled, and collected the clothes they tossed

over the screen, and put them on her mother's washing pile.

"Thank you," the other soldier said, when his new uniform was on, and his still-drying hair was hanging loose around his shoulders instead of in its usual topknot. He bowed his head, just a little, though his eyes didn't leave hers.

"Is there anything else you need?"

"My morning back," his friend groused, pulling on a boot. "We're going to be late for patrol. Wasn't there some big meeting today? Sarge is going to chew us out."

"Nothing," his friend said. "Thank you; really."

"You're welcome," she said. "Have a good day."

She bowed again. The Fire Nation liked their bows more than the Earth Kingdom did. She was never sure when she *should* bow, so she always did. She wouldn't be wrong again.

"You too, Miss Song. I'll pick up those groceries for your mother on the way home tonight, if you'd like."

"We wouldn't want to be a bother."

"It's no problem," he said, and he already had the list in his hand, so she kept on her smile, and bowed again as the two soldiers went out the door.

"Is it just me, or does the Earth Kingdom bow way more than we do?" the first soldier said. "Like, *way* more. It's like we're living in a town full of servants. Is this what being nobility feels like? I'm pretty sure this is what being nobility feels like."

“It’s just their culture,” his friend said. “Stop being impolite.”

“It’s weird, is all. Hey, did you hear? Taro said he spotted a war balloon last night.”

“The last time Taro spotted a war balloon at night, it was a firefly screech owl.”

“Yeah, well. Gives us something to look into. I really thought a town like this would have more fight left in it. We only took them what, at the end of spring? It already feels like living in the colonies, just with less barracks.”

“They’ve been a border town for years. It’s not like they didn’t know this was coming.”

“At least the girls are pretty, right?” He sent an elbow into his friend’s side.

“Ssh,” his friend said, and then there was only laughter and hushed voices, as they mounted their rhinos and started towards the town.

Her mother handed her a lunch box, wrapped in a plum-pricot print cloth. Song hugged her, tighter than she needed to, less tight than she wanted. Then she took her lunch, and left.

The autumn sun was warm. By the time she’d reached the clinic, it had soothed the creeping chill from her skin, and eased the limp left in her leg from yesterday’s storm.

There was the usual mix of locals and Fire Nation soldiers inside. The soldiers were mostly in the long-term ward, now; the few still healing from when they’d first taken the town. The locals were mostly those picking up medicines; quick in-and-out visits. There was also the wainwright’s eldest, who’d managed to run over his foot. Again.

“Use,” she said, tracing along the bones, “a,” she continued, testing whether that spot was a break or just a bruise, *“stopblock.”*

“I will, I just forgot, oww oww *oww—”*

It was not a particularly large clinic, nor did it possess particularly thick walls. The soldiers were grinning by the time she peeked into their ward.

“What,” she said. Then, with a deep breath in and a smile, “...Can I help you with?”

“Nothing,” one of them said, rather hurriedly.

She did not narrow her eyes. She kept smiling. “Let me know if you need anything, sirs,” she said, and bowed.

The day went on. She worked with the other healers to bring the soldiers their pain medicine. To change bandages, to carefully stretch muscles made weak from bedrest, to turn those who needed help with turning and bathe those who needed help with bathing. They might be Fire Nation, but their pain was the same as any person’s. They all had a story, something that brought them here, just like any Earth Kingdom citizen. They were people, and they deserved her best.

Towards the end of her shift, their cleaner tapped her on the arm. “Tenpa found a sick animal in the woods this morning. Think you could take a look?”

Song rolled her eyes. “Another one?”

“Is that your kid?” one of the soldiers asked, reaching down to pick up the trash bin near his bed. Song stared at his hand. She did not slap it, because one did not slap Fire Nation soldiers. She smiled. He stopped reaching.

“Yeah,” the cleaner said, picking up the bin a lot more easily than a man with stitches in his side could. “He’s always bringing things home.”

“I’ll take a look,” Song promised.

“Thanks, Song. I think it had a fever. Maybe some burns?”

The soldier winced. “I’ll tell the privates to stop playing target practice. …Once I get out of here.”

“That would be very kind of you, Sergeant. But please, don’t push yourself.”

“You’ll heal faster if you listen to her,” their cleaner said, setting the empty bin back down with his own smile.

Song washed her hands a final time, and put a few supplies in a basket with her empty lunchbox, and said her goodbyes. She stepped outside. She walked, not towards home, but towards the trail further into the forest.

She was immediately intercepted by an overly enthusiastic child.

“They came down in a—!” he started, at maximum volume.

She put a hand over his mouth, and turned him around. Once they were well out of sight of the clinic, she gave a nod.

“They came down on a *war balloon,”* Tenpa whisper-shouted. “I think they’re escaped prisoners. One of them said she’s a Kyoshi Warrior and another one can walk on her hands like this,” he fell over, “well it looks better when she does it, and another has *rainbow fire—”*

Song stopped. “They’re firebenders?”

“Just the one,” Tenpa said. “I really do think they escaped. I asked them first if they wanted to go to the clinic, or if I should let the soldiers know they were here, and they *definitely* didn’t want that. They don’t want to be seen at all. And one of them has burns. Old burns and really new burns, he’s the sick one. You’ll help him, right?”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Of course I will.”

The same as she’d done for everyone who could no longer come to the clinic. Their own soldiers, who’d fought and lost, who were called rebels now. Tucked into a dozen hidden places until they were well enough to run. And those who wouldn’t run, who kept fighting, kept getting hurt, and she had to patch them up over and over until there was nothing left—

Song took in a breath. Let it out. Then she let go of Tenpa’s shoulder, and smiled. They kept walking.

Tenpa had taken them to the old forester’s hut. Three girls were arrayed outside. One of them was sitting against the little building’s weathered walls, cuddling… a golden ostrich-horse egg? Another was flipping a knife, over and over. The third straightened up as they approached, and crossed her arms.

“You said you were bringing a healer,” she accused Tenpa. “Not another child.”

Song smiled. “Where’s the patient? I can see to him, while you try to find someone more qualified.”

Good luck with that, her smile did not say, because she was, once more, choosing kindness.

“In here,” said a fourth girl, stepping out from the hut. An Earth Kingdom girl. The Kyoshi Warrior?

“I’m fine,” rasped a male voice, still inside.

“No, you are— Zuko, get *back in bed—”*

“It’s not a bed, it’s hay.”

“Get back in the hay, then,” she said, putting out an arm to block Song’s new patient from coming outside.

Song’s smile was a bit more genuine than it had been all day. “He’s got a fever, right? Let me.”

She stepped closer. The girl in the doorway stepped clear, with an exasperated air. This allowed her new patient to stumble a step forward into the doorway. He stood there, blinking. Song did, too.

“You,” she said, her smile twitching in place. “You *stole my ostrich horse.”*

He blinked at her a moment more. Then *pointed* at her, looking to his friends. “I stole her ostrich horse.”

The girl in the doorway ran a hand down her face. The one with the knives sighed, the one with the egg nodded at this apparently perfectly reasonable statement, and the rude girl cackled.

Song. Was done choosing kindness.

Chapter 38: A Junior by Any Other Name

“Where,” Song said, poking him in the chest, “is she.” And yes, that was definitely a fever he was running, how hot *was* he that she could feel it from just a poke.

“Who?” he asked, blinking his big thieving eyes at her.

“You make friends everywhere you go, don’t you Zuzu,” the rude girl said.

“My ostrich horse,” Song said, ignoring her.

“Confiscated,” he said.

“Confiscated?”

“The ferry people took her.”

“The—” Song took in a breath, and let it out. She wondered how hard she’d have to push to knock him over. She put a bit more pressure behind her chest-poking finger, as a medical experiment. “Why did you steal my ostrich horse?”

“Because I didn’t have one, and I needed one, otherwise my sister would catch us.” He wobbled, a little. And pointed again, though not at her. “That’s my sister.”

The rude girl’s smile was sharp.

“Are you going to treat him or not,” the knife-tossing girl said, somehow making it a disinterested statement rather than a question.

Song gave Junior—which was, surprise surprise, *not* his real name—a long look. His wobbling actually seemed *stabilized* by her poking. She removed her finger, and took a step back as he stumbled forward.

“Not,” she said.

“Don’t healers have a code?” the girl with the inexplicably fancy egg said.

“Yes,” Song said. “First ostrich-horse on the house, then payment up front.”

“Oh, I like you,” the rude girl said. “Heal my brother and I won’t even burn you.”

“Azula,” said the Kyoshi Warrior.

And, after a slight processing delay: “Azula,” said Junior.

Song took in another breath, because deep breaths triggered the body’s relaxation response, which would be helpful for slowing her heart down before it got loud enough for the nearest Fire Nation patrol to hear. She shifted her weight off her bad leg, and turned to face the girl.

“Are you the one who burned him?” she asked.

The rude girl examined her nails. “Not this time.”

“We broke out of prison,” he confided, at a very loud whisper.

“Fire Nation prison?” Song asked, and received a very earnest nod. She wondered, a little, if she could gauge how high his fever was by how willing he was to overshare dangerous details. Currently, he was at *Giving Her Enough Rope To Hang Him* degrees. He was extremely, extremely lucky that the only people she wanted to talk to less than him were her town’s occupying forces.

Still. The Fire Nation would be looking for him and his… companions. They didn’t just let prisoners *escape.* They’d be coming for him, hunting him like they were hunting the fighters of her own town. She wanted to believe that helping him would be an act of solidarity, a united front against a nation whose leadership chose evil, choose violence, over and over again.

But she’d wanted to believe he would bring back her ostrich-horse, too. That he would have seen her watching him leave, and maybe he’d go a little ways down the road, but he would remember the kindness she and her mother had shown and realize that people like them were stronger when they *helped* each other.

She took another step away. “Come on, Tenpa.”

The boy had been watching their conversation with the sort of fascination little kids had for cart wrecks.

“What are you doing?” the rude girl asked, her sharp smiles and amusement with this situation suddenly gone.

There was choosing to be good, choosing to be kind. And then there was choosing to be taken advantage of.

“Leaving,” Song said.

She couldn’t afford to help them, not with her other patients hidden across town, depending on her. People who had fought to help others stay free; not whatever *he’d* been doing. For all she knew, he’d been in jail for stealing komodo-rhinos from the Fire Nation, after he’d gotten her ostrich-horse *confiscated.*

“Wait,” the Kyoshi Warrior said, taking a step after her. “I know this is… I know he’s terrible. You don’t have to do this out of the goodness of your heart; we can pay, and then we’ll get out of here. You’ll never have to deal with him again.”

She’d thought *that* before.

Song stared at a fire-touched boy that she’d thought she’d known one starlit night on her porch, however briefly. However mistakenly. He was still swaying in the doorway, apparently too feverish to be concerned with speaking up for himself.

He had no loyalty. No honor. And she had no obligation to risk herself and her town for him.

“We could really use your help,” the girl pressed.

“I know you could,” Song said. “But he doesn’t deserve it.”

The warrior had an odd look on her face. Like she wanted to disagree on principle, but couldn’t, also on principle.

“About that burning,” the rude girl said, darkly. And Tenpa was right, she was a firebender, she had *blue flames,* and the part of Song that studied every text she could wondered if that was a chemical reaction or temperature-based or an indication that all the base material had been consumed—what *did* firebenders burn? It would be easier to think if her heart would stop lurching and her leg would stop throbbing. The rude girl was only holding a fire above her hand, but fire on a hand was how it had begun last time—

“We came to *help,”* Tenpa said, outraged, with a child’s grip on justice.

“And now she’s not helping,” the firebender said.

“You can’t just—” the little boy argued, and Song realized she had to get to him, get between the firebender and him, because children couldn’t argue with firebenders. She knew it, Junior knew it, and she wouldn’t let Tenpa learn.

A branch snapped then, somewhere close. They all had a frozen moment to realize it: that they’d been watching their own drama, and none of them had been watching the woods.

There were soldiers. Fire Nation, of course. Five total, and the two that had eaten her mother’s food this morning at least had the grace to look uneasy as they met her eyes.

“Run,” she said to Tenpa, careful not to say his name, maybe they didn’t know yet, maybe he could still get away and hide. What was one more Earth Kingdom child, to these people.

“Halt,” one of the soldiers said.

“I can’t—” Tenpa said.

“Run.”

He still had legs that were good for running.

“I said *halt,”* the soldier said, and stepped forward, his bare hands more terrifying than any sword. Fire bloomed.

Junior was suddenly *there,* crossing his bandage-wrapped arms in front of his scarred face like he was *fireproof.*

The Kyoshi Warrior snagged his arm in one hand, and the rude girl’s in her other. She spun, reversing the sibling’s positions as smoothly as if this were all some dance. The rude girl took the same stance Junior had; when she flicked her arms, the flames broke to either side of her.

She promptly glared at the warrior. “Excuse you,” she said, “I am not one of your *fans.”*

“And I’m not one of yours,” the girl replied.

Then they were both standing side by side, Junior behind them, and all three between the soldiers and Tenpa. The other two girls stepped up to either side of Song.

“You’re under arrest for suspicion of aiding rebels,” one of the soldiers said. “And of being rebels,” he said, shifting his sneer around their group.

“Rebels,” the rude girl said, dryly. “Like your rightful Fire Lords?”

She tilted her head. The stylized flame in her top knot glinted gold in the sun.

Song did not understand why a hair accessory had such an immediate and dramatic effect on the soldiers. She didn’t understand a lot of things about the Fire Nation. This was, unfortunately, a statement which would only grow more true with time.

For now, a very important fact settled into her mind.

“Wait,” she said, turning to stare. “You’re not Li Junior, you’re *Ozai Junior?”*

Chapter 39: Got Ninety-Nine Problems but Plural Fire Lords Ain't One

There was a dragon in Caldera, Governor Shohei's correspondent said, in handwriting rushed, the bird who had carried the message bedraggled from the stormwinds it had ridden. There was a dragon in Caldera, so large it had spent the night wrapped around the royal palace as it slumbered. The size must be an exaggeration, of course. But his correspondent would not have let their imagination run away with them on the rest: Fire Lord Iroh had departed the city one day, not even for a *full* day, and returned with the beast behind him, tame as a dog-lizard at its master's heel. There were fewer signs of Agni's favor more bold-faced than that, and the people of the capital were taking it as such.

Other messages:

His local commander had begun a minor operation to sweep their newest village of rebels. She anticipated minimal resistance. Outside his window, the governor could already hear the first of the lot being dragged in. The holding cells were, unfortunate at times like this, located in the same compound as his own offices.

The harbormaster had sent word of another Northern Tribe ship, this one spotted just north of the shipping lanes. A supply ship expected in port yesterday still remained unaccounted for. It could have been the storm, but.

No, the northern admiral had replied to his latest entreaties. No, Fire Lord Iroh still had not granted permission to harry those blue-sailed pirates back up to their ice fields. In fact, their navy was to cease hostilities against the Southern Tribe's fleet, as well, while His Majesty pursued peace talks with their leader. Who he'd plucked from prison. Where the man had rightfully been rotting, for having the temerity to stage an attack on Fire Nation soil. Why the man had not been executed, Governor Shohei did not know.

Former Fire Lord Ozai, it was said, also still lived. Locked up somewhere under Ba Sing Se, and none of their many Fire Lords since the comet had expressed an interest in rectifying that. They had very few troops stationed near there now, and less each day, as Iroh continued his nephew's campaign to withdraw their troops.

To fortify their existing borders, Fire Lord Zuko's orders had said.

To facilitate the withdrawal of troops and civilians alike, Fire Lord Iroh's made clear.

Governor Shohei of the newly expanded Shinchiheisen colony had worked hard for his position. Born in the colonies, he'd had to be peerless in his achievements at the Royal Caldera Academy to shake the dirt from his reputation. Born the third child of the former governor, he'd had to outmaneuver his siblings in society to earn his position. Born an earthbender— Well. He was a non-bender, and if he liked to spend his evenings kicking at his potter's wheel with a bare foot while the clay formed under his hands, it was an unremarkable hobby. Raku pottery was as much about the fire that finished it as the earth from which it was formed. If he liked to keep his own pieces on display around his office and the manor at large, it was a harmless little show of pride. Rather endearing, thought his half-earth wife, whose own parentage would answer any unfortunate *dispositions* their children might display as they grew.

Governor Shohei had not worked all his life for *this*.

This was the letter on his desk, pressed with the Fire Lord's own seal.

...Begin preparing your citizens for repatriation…

His colony, the colony of his and his children's birth, had been deemed too *Earth* for the Fire Nation to keep. Despite the Fire Nation blood spilt to take it, the sweat to build it from the backwater travel stop it had been to the thriving trade town it was. They were an important link along the colonial chain, connecting the eldest northern colonies to their central cousins in Pohuai, Gaipan, and the younger colonies even further south.

Yet another letter: Governor Ukano of Gaipan had sent his mildly worded condolences, for their mutual misfortune. He remarked, equally mild, on their good fortune to have so many extra troops present, to enforce what would no doubt be an unpopular decree.

"Governor?" his secretary said, interrupting where those thoughts led. "There's a soldier here for you."

“Governor Shohei,” the soldier said, standing at the kind of attention troops only used when under inspection or just prior to reprimand, “we have a situation.”

The situation was in the courtyard, where the rebels were being sorted out. They’d known, of course, that most of the initial resistance had been driven underground. Rather literally, in some cases— *earthbenders,* his commander had scoffed, *a worse infestation than badger-moles,* and Shohei had hmmed his agreement. They’d brought in a specialist to deal with the issue of sniffing out each hidey-hole.

The bounty hunter accosted him on the steps of his own manor, her shirshu curled up on his peony-hydrangea garden, its disgusting nose *wiggling* all over the crushed flowers. Some of those plants had been older than Shohei himself. His *grandfather* had seen them planted.

“Those ones aren’t my problem,” she said, bafflingly, with no other greeting. “I want the other half of my payment, and then I want gone.”

“Lady Jun,” Governor Shohei said, “could you relocate your beast?”

She had a very particular *look* for him, whenever he addressed her as lady. “Could,” she said. “My money?”

“See my secretary.”

“Always a pleasure, Governor.”

“Likewise,” Shohei said, and was sure the true sentiment was mutual.

Her questionable dress code, barely controlled mount, and general disposition aside, there were few better at rooting out where rebels had gone to ground. The results spoke for

themselves: across the courtyard, sometimes being dragged by his troops, were rebels in various states of paralysis.

That was not the situation. That was not the *those ones* to which the bounty hunter had referred.

That honor belonged to the group now approaching him, walking past his own soldiers who did nothing to stop them, some of whom *bowed,* as they approached him with the audacity of —

Of—

"Ah," the Governor said, in a voice that had not been quite so high since his time at academy. "I see."

"Yes, sir," the soldier at his side commiserated.

"Governor Shohei," former Fire Lord Azula said, with the crown of a princess in her hair. "We accept your hospitality. We will require a full suite of rooms, of course; yours should do nicely."

"Your…" Highness? Majesty? How did one address a princess who was Fire Lord for a day, and had given up the title with the same legality as her father before her? "...We had not expected you."

"We are an unexpected delight, I know," the girl said. It should have been ridiculous: she was a head and a half shorter than him, three decades younger, and lacking in any titles or place in this world that he did not acknowledge her to have. The last his correspondents had spoken of her, she'd been in a *mental ward.*

But it was very, very hard to stand before that golden gaze, and *not* acknowledge her.

“Lieutenant,” he said, to the man next to him, “see to it that my secretary knows to prepare the rooms.”

He would host them for now, of course. Whether they remained his guests or he sent word to the current Fire Lord, he would sort out later, when his mind was spinning with fewer ramifications. There were… possibilities, here. If the girl were staying long, perhaps Ukano could be persuaded to come visit. He was sure they would all have many things to discuss.

“Sir,” the soldier said. “That’s the rebel’s healer.”

“Ah,” he said again, following the man’s gaze to a girl dressed somewhat more brightly than the typical peasant. She was, for some reason, standing at the back of the princess’ motley group, an even younger boy half-hidden behind her legs.

“She’s with us,” another of the princess’ group said. A girl of Earth Kingdom stock. Southern Earth Kingdom, if he had to guess.

“Is she, though,” said another of the girls. She had a knife balanced on one finger. The knife looked as if it had started life as a spoon. It took Shohei a moment to recognize her as Ukano’s *daughter.* The one imprisoned for treason, by the princess—Fire Lord?—she now stood behind.

Possibilities, and possibilities.

“Yes,” the Earth Kingdom girl said. “She is. She’s Zuko’s healer.”

Even hearing the name, even with only one teenage boy in their group, even having had the boy and his uncle to dine on their occasional port visits over the past three years, it took Shohei a long moment to recognize the prince. Former Fire Lord Zuko, it seemed, had been in much more disfavor at his uncle’s court than Shohei’s correspondents had indicated. The signs of starvation could have been from his father’s reign, but the burns seeping through his bandages were new, and rather fit the timeline of that coronation speech of his.

They said that the former Fire Lord Zuko had denounced his uncle before the sages and every witness, noble or not, rather than accept his demotion back to prince.

"That's right," the final girl in their group said, and was that one of the *Ty septuplets?* "You can't execute her. She's our royal physician."

Their so-called royal physician squeezed the shoulder of the boy sheltering behind her, then drew herself up to a height that continued to be unimpressive. "You can't execute *them,* or I won't work."

Them clearly referred to her fellow rebels, rather than the people attempting to aid her. As Shohei said: unimpressive.

But the Fire Princess stared at her a moment, then shifted her gaze to Shohei. "It seems our *royal physician's* friends will require accommodations as well, Governor. The suites in your usual prison, perhaps?"

"That's not what I meant," the healer said.

"But it's what you get." The princess shrugged.

"...We can get a better healer," Governor Shohei put in, because really, this was getting to be quite enough.

"Better? Likely," the princess agreed. "But it's rare I can count my reasons to trust someone." She ran an eye over the other rebels, rather pointedly. "Send your *better healers* to make sure none of those reasons expires."

Shohei looked over their group. And the rebels, and the soldiers guarding them. And the colony, his colony, its buildings and people and the land he'd been born to.

One final question, then.

“What are those?” he asked, of the pebbled eggs the prince held to his chest.

“Dragon eggs,” the princess said, her smile neither happy nor kind.

There was a dragon in caldera, they said. A sign of Agni’s favor. The people believed it. How much more favor, then, would the people find in *two?*

“As you wish, Your Majesty,” Governor Shohei said, with a proper royal bow.

Chapter 40: Zuko Please Stop Getting Sand In Your Bandages

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zuko was in a very comfortable bed, which was wrong. The only comfortable beds were in the palace, and he… wasn't there, was he? Ozai had—

Uncle had—

"Why is there *sand* in his bandages," a voice said.

It was a voice he'd stolen an ostrich-horse from.

Not the palace, Zuko thought, and went back to sleep.

"...Perhaps we could continue this discussion somewhere more—"

"Governor Shohei," Azula said, "my brother is unconscious, my dragons unhatched, and your guards good only as a training warm-up for any imperial benders worth their flame. If you wish to speak to me of our great nation's future, you may do so while I remain in this room."

Zuko felt safe going back to sleep that time, too.

When he did wake up, there were three eggs tucked against his side. Two of them felt like they were warming him as much as he was warming them, their faint heartbeats pulsing in countertime to his own. The third felt like a rock.

“Ty Lee,” he grumble-complained, poking the rock away from his ribcage.

“It was easier to humor her,” Azula said, looking up from her correspondence. Because of course she had correspondence. “Good afternoon, brother. So nice of you to join me. Were the colonies quite so welcoming the last time you were here?”

“Last time I was here I was banished,” Zuko said.

“That was rhetorical, Zuzu. Regardless, I am *quite* curious to know how all these governors treated a member of the royal family when the tides were against you. Call it a character study.”

Zuko carefully extracted his arm from around the eggs, and held his palm out for the letters. She handed over a small but rather exclusive stack, which he flipped through, reading the names.

“This one always invited Unc— Iroh and I to dinner when we were in port. Really awkward dinners, but he tried to be nice about it. This guy mostly ignored us. This one tried to impound my ship for unpaid docking fees. Ships on special assignment don’t *pay* docking fees.”

“Zuko, you weren’t on special assignment.”

“I was ordered to capture the Avatar. That’s a special assignment.”

“That was the end condition for your banishment. ‘Banished, don’t come home’ is not a special assignment.”

“You sound just like her,” Zuko scowled.

“Do I,” she said. “Hmm. I think I’ll write back to that one.”

Zuko forgot, for a moment, that he couldn’t burn things anymore. That was the only reason she was able to pluck that particular letter back intact.

He pulled himself up a bit higher on his pillow. Resettled the dragon eggs next to his side. Then watched her write, for a while. She still crinkled her brow when she was composing, the same way she had when she was eleven.

“Has the governor been trying to talk you into taking the throne?” he asked, finally.

She didn’t even look up. “Ask me something less obvious, Zuzu.”

“Will you?”

She set her brush down at the edge of her ink stone. “I had the throne. It… was less than perfect.” She’d had a complete breakdown, neither of them said. “I much preferred our arrangement: you do the work, and I recline on the pillows.”

“Terrifyingly,” he said, with a smile.

“Of course, *terrifyingly,”* she said, raising her chin. “I can hardly expect you to intimidate your *own* court.”

…Because he’d held the throne, too. His smile dropped. “I don’t want a civil war.”

“You underestimate and overestimate your role in this, simultaneously. This was going to happen. With or without you and your little speech, it would have happened. It would have happened *to* you, if you’d stayed on the throne; any Fire Lord trying to rewrite a century of lucrative military policy would have had assassins in the walls and discontent in the ranks. Your little speech just passed the problem to Uncle, and left us looking like the better option. Oh, look at us, the young, impressionable royals. Won’t some brave and loyal advisor help us with *policy suggestions.”* Azula gestured to her letter stack.

“We can still try to find that nice Earth Kingdom family,” he said.

But some nice Earth Kingdom generals might have an opinion about Ozai’s children stepping foot on Earth Kingdom soil again. And he’d met nice Earth Kingdom families; they only liked refugees until the flames came out.

…Or the ostrich-horse theft started. He really needed to get Song a new bird. Maybe two new birds. Or a really nice saddle? Two birds with really nice saddles? He’d packed away money with the rest of their supplies, but he didn’t actually know how much an ostrich-horse cost, and he had a feeling that stolen money was maybe not a solution to the stolen-ostrich-horse problem that Song would accept.

“This isn’t a dream, is it?” Azula asked. Her tone was light, but it was a more serious question than it perhaps should have been.

“No,” Zuko said.

“Did you ever have a plan, Zuzu?” Azula asked. She did not wait for his answer, which was a correct assumption on her part. “We’re going to need one, unless you intend for us to just keep running until someone catches us. Or executes us. Unless we can hold out long enough for our dragons to grow; then I suppose we could let them eat our problems.”

“We are not training our dragons to eat people.”

“Dragons are highly intelligent,” she said. “If ours make the reasoned decision to eat someone, who are we to stand in their way?”

Zuko hugged the eggs closer to his chest. “You’re not going to eat people,” he told them.

“Hear that?” Azula said, pitching her voice towards them. “That’s the voice of your Dum-Dum. He has no taste.”

“…Was that an eating people joke?”

Her smile was sharp, her expression self-satisfied. Her jokes… about as good as Ambassador Snoozle’s. Zuko made the tactical decision to keep silent on that fact.

Three days later found the governor inviting them to dinner, with select *sympathetic individuals* who would, of course, treat the Fire siblings’ presence with *complete discretion.*

It found Zuko, ten degrees into the unscripted mingling after a meal he’d barely eaten, staring at himself in the mirror above a bathroom sink. The governor’s manor had piped water, cold *and* hot, a true luxury on this side of the sea. A quiet mark of the Fire Nation’s superiority, of the culture and civilization they would bring to these lands.

They could have just… let the other nations study at the Royal Academy of Engineering. Or sent over skilled workers; sold their services. Sent volunteers, even, if it was such a noble cause. Maybe they could have *asked* whether the other nations wanted any of their superior culture. Had anyone else believed those lies? Were they just… things that people in the Fire Nation said so that the other nations had a harder time calling them out on the truth, but everyone important actually knew, and thought that anyone who *was* fooled was an idiot—

Azula would have laughed at him for asking, so. That was already his answer.

He'd left the hot water running. He wondered if it was like a proper Fire Nation tap, piped straight from a hot spring, or if it was some boiler kept heated by a firebender on duty—or, even more scandalous, some non-bending servant watching over a fire Agni had no hand in. Spring water wouldn't run out. But a boiler would run cold, and then all the guests would *know.* And laugh behind their hands, like people at court always did.

He really, really didn't want to go back to the mingling.

He turned off the water. Because if it *was* from a boiler, if it did run out, if the governor heard that laughing, Zuko didn't want someone to lose their job over it.

Azula probably would have laughed at that thought, too.

He went back. He mingled. He survived a night of people smiling at him, and implying things, and *expecting* things, and laughing behind Fire Lord Iroh's back, because now they had their own Fire Lords. And it didn't matter at all who those Fire Lords were, just that they could hold them up to Iroh and say, *We're loyal citizens, just not to you,* and do whatever it was they'd already been planning to do.

How nice it must be, to have teenage figureheads fall into their laps. Ones that would be hunted refugees, if not for their host's *sympathy* and *discretion.*

"They think we're going to be easy to influence," Azula said, when they were back in their rooms. "It may be an attitude to encourage, as we find those truly loyal to us. After the coronation, a turnover of the council is practically tradition, after all."

"Can I jump out a window, instead?" said Zuko, who was laying in bed.

She was working her crown free from her hair. Her hands did not pause. "Zuzu, you can do anything you want. *We* can do anything we want. If you'd rather jump out a window, set the manor on fire, and disappear into the wilderness, we can. Wild animals do have certain advantages when compared to a colonial's attempts at politicking. They're more pleasant to watch, for a start."

“I am not setting the manor on fire.”

“Tonight was only about exploring our options,” she continued.

“Azula. We’re not setting the manor on fire.”

She reached for her comb, with a non-committal *hmm.* “Are you going out that window or not?”

The window in question looked out over the town as it sloped down to the night-black sea, with its wave crests of reflected moonlight. He’d mostly been joking. Mostly.

Someone knocked on their door. “Your Majesties?” Governor Shohei’s muffled voice inquired.

“Want to come with?” Zuko asked.

“...Are you coming back?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then enjoy your little stroll,” she said, resuming her brushing. She would need to put her crown back in before seeing the governor again, of course.

He got caught. Rather embarrassingly quickly, actually. But his still-bandaged arm was stinging after the climb down, and the shadows in the courtyard were not as deep as he could have wanted, and the smells from the nearby kitchen were actually *really good* now that he wasn’t eating under the scrutiny of the same nobles who’d used to spurn the banished prince. So. When the door to the kitchens opened and a woman stepped out carrying something to

the garbage, there was suddenly more light, and even better smells wafting out, and his stomach rumbled really unmistakably. She paused, silhouetted against the doorway, and squinted into the darkness.

"...Your Majesty?"

The voice was familiar. But he couldn't quite place it, until—

She set the trash down, not taking her eyes off him, and bustled over. What followed was a very thorough and even more familiar appraisal of his state, with critical eyes and deft hands that flicked off dirt he hadn't known was there and straightened his shirt collar and paused at his ponytail with its utter lack of ornament before clearly writing it off as a loss.

"You," Lady Huian said, "are supposed to be resting, Your Majesty."

He'd last seen her on the Agni Kai field. She'd been the one to put the gold bands on his arms. He hadn't been able to remember her name then, and he didn't know why, except that it was hard to remember things in nightmares.

"I, ah. I'm taking a walk? Walks are… good. For my health."

"Is that what your physician would say, Your Majesty?" the former head housekeeper of the imperial palace inquired, her voice mild.

"Uh."

"If you're not sure, perhaps we should ask her. Her rooms are in the servant's quarters."

"...Is this where the sick relatives are?" Zuko asked, and he felt stupid as soon as it was out of his mouth, because he knew what that meant now.

But her lips had pulled back in a smile, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “Quite a few of them, yes. Though your cook is employed at Gaipan now, I believe. The newer colonies have more opportunities for those who come without reference.”

…She’d been taking out the *trash.* Head housekeepers didn’t do that. And they didn’t wear such plain clothes as she had on now.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You should be… you should still have a place at the palace.”

“So should you,” she said. “Your Majesty. I did not leave because of your actions; I had to leave because of my own. Because I protected those under me. Because I did what I thought right, even though it took me a long time to find what *was* right. Should I be ashamed?”

“What? No. You—”

“My apologies. So royalty and commoners should be judged by differing standards?”

“That’s not—” His face was starting to burn.

“Someone very foolish said that we should do what’s right. That a hundred years of standing by must end sometime. I picked my time, and I’ll thank you not to apologize on my behalf.”

“Are you… misquoting my speech at me?” his brows furrowed. “I didn’t think you were still at the palace then.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled with laugh lines he’d never noticed. “Oh, I wasn’t. But you can buy a copy of that speech off certain scribes, if you know where to look. There’s one passing around the staff.”

His stomach took that time to rumble again apropos of nothing because it, like the rest of him, had never learned respect.

Lady Huian went into the kitchen. She came back with a little handkerchief, wrapped around still-warm rice balls; a servant's snack.

"Don't be gone long, Your Majesty," she said. "There are those of us who would worry."

He ate as he walked. The *nori* was still crisp, not yet softened by steam. She'd made them with salmon-shrimp on the inside, which had been his favorite when he was twelve, before he'd tried them with the fresh eel-crabs they hung traps for on the *Wanyi.* The riceballs sat better than the rich foods from dinner; closer to what his stomach was used to over the last three years of his life.

The docks were empty save for the occasional watchman on guard or sailor calling the night early. He walked to the end, past the laughter and light from the last tavern before the sands. He very carefully skirted past the shirshu resting on the opposite side of the building from the ostrich-horses and eel-hounds. Then he hopped down on the sand, and kept walking until the lights didn't dim the stars and the sounds of the port were washed away under the waves. Then he sat down, took his shoes off, and let his feet rest at the edge of the surf.

…At which point a pack of tiny, weirdly carapaced puppies started lunging at his toes every time the waves swept them close, so he scooted a few feet further back into drier sand. Then he took out another rice ball. And laid back. And just… looked at the stars.

He knew them, from three years of navigation charts; a skill he'd learned because he hadn't trusted his crew. Where were they now? Had Zhao dragged them into the northern invasion, or had the same poor records that had gotten them assigned to a banished prince's junk ship seen them shunted off to grunt work at a harbor somewhere, where they couldn't screw things up too badly. Where giant fish spirits couldn't drag them into the deep.

His rice balls were a little chilled now, but still warm on the inside. He bit into another, and stared up at a moon that his country had murdered. …Did they owe reparations to the Moon?

“Huh,” said the woman who was suddenly blocking his moon-gazing. “Thought that was you. Your hair looks better like that.”

The rest of him, the bounty hunter’s sweeping gaze clearly said, did not.

“Heard your old man dethroned you,” Jun continued, despite the clear lack of anyone asking her.

“He’s my uncle,” Zuko corrected, after a deep breath out.

She shrugged, which was fair.

“Rice ball?” he offered up.

“What, are they poisoned?” she asked, and took a bite. Said, quietly, *huh,* and bit again. Rice was starting to speckle her cheeks, which was terrible table manners.

He wiped a grain off his own cheek, and ate it off his thumb.

“I hear he wants you back,” she said. “Are you going?”

“Don’t you have a bar fight to start?” Zuko asked in return, eyes narrowed.

Jun whistled. And grinned. “Ah, there’s the prince I remember. And that’s a bar fight to *win,* thank you. In fact, I’ll make that a tip on the house: don’t start fights you can’t win.” She paused, and hooked a thumb back over her shoulder, towards the distant lights of the bar. “Were you planning on winning this one? Because there’s an awful lot of toasting going on to this little rebellion you’re starting, kid.”

“I’m not starting a *rebellion.”*

“Uh-huh,” she said. “And I thought I was bad as a teenager.”

He scowled. “Not going back doesn’t mean I’m starting a *rebellion.* People are just… deciding that.”

“Ah, he answers,” she shoved the last bite of riceball in her mouth, and licked her fingers. “So you’re not going back. You know what I call that?” she asked, a hand on her hip.

“What,” he asked in his best Mai-monotone, when it became clear she was waiting for the prompt, and would keep waiting, until he asked.

“A business opportunity.”

…Zuko was only surprised that he was surprised.

Her hand wasn’t on her hip, it was on her *whip.* “I wasn’t going to do this. But you are making it way too easy; it’s like tripping over a bag of gold on the street. The sand. Whatever.” She paused, still staring down at him. “I bet your uncle would prefer if you didn’t get manhandled.”

She didn’t state her own preference. She didn’t have to, with her shirshu trotting up to loom over her shoulder, its tentacled nose snuffling under her patting hand.

She’d whistled earlier. She’d whistled for *it.*

Zuko rolled carefully to his feet, hands raised.

“Good boy,” the bounty hunter said, which was possibly the first time he’d been called that since his mother disappeared. “Come on, over here then. I’ll even use the good rope.”

He came. And stole her knife in passing.

He’d left his swords behind at the manor. Left his firebending behind somewhere in the Fire Nation. He was a good fighter even without them, but a knife couldn’t do much against a shirshu’s thick fur.

It didn’t hurt against a bounty hunter, though.

She slung him over the front of her saddle, freshly paralyzed, and set to work bandaging up her arm one-handed, her teeth holding the other end. He wouldn’t be getting any more *good boys* out of her.

She wiped the sand off his last riceball and shoved it in her mouth before climbing up. His shoes lay on their side behind them, forgotten. Lady Huian’s handkerchief fluttered in the ocean breeze, pinned down by the sand they’d kicked up in their fight.

…He’d gotten sand in his bandages again.

Elsewhere, Katara prepared for a trip. She did not have a good feeling about it. This was just as well.

Chapter End Notes

Did you forget that Katara needs her field trip

Do you remember now

Chapter 41: The Northern Raiders

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Katara stepped foot in the village on a rainy day, with two Fire Nation soldiers and a legal officer. And her dad, and her brother. Hakoda set a hand on her shoulder, and Sokka shoulder-checked her and tried to smile, and they… went in.

They had the man's home address, but it still took asking directions in the town. It was a small place, drained of its fighting-age citizens as much as every other small town they'd traveled through. In the Fire Nation, in the Earth Kingdom. It was doing much better than *her* village.

His home was up a path. His mother opened the door. She was old, older than Gran-Gran. Her face looked like it had outgrown smiling.

"We're living on his pension," she said, after she'd read the warrant.

"It won't be affected, ma'am," the legal officer assured her, and looked like she was going to say more words, to make the process of seeing one's son arrested a less terrible thing—

"He's out back, in his useless garden," the old woman said, and closed the door in their faces.

Their group shared a mutual look. They went around the side of the house.

There was a little garden, well-weeded but wilting. There was a man, kneeling in front of it. This wasn't how she'd imagined him kneeling.

"Can I help you?" he asked. His knees cracked when he stood. He rubbed at the small of his back.

“Yon Rha?” the legal officer asked, stepping forward. “Formerly of the Southern Raiders?”

“Yes?” the man asked.

“You’re under arrest, for crimes in contradiction to the honorable conduct of war.”

“There must be some mistake; I retired. Years ago, I retired.” He didn’t seem to understand, that the past could come looking for him.

“Do you remember me?” Katara asked, because she had to.

He didn’t.

* * *

Jun woke up hungover, in the cargo bay of a ship, with a Fire Prince. Her mouth tasted like riceballs. Her head, not to be confused with her conscience, felt like regret. She rolled over just enough to check that she’d made every mistake Drunk Jun remembered making.

The Fire Prince—Fire Lord? Fire Lord’s nephew? Not even sober Jun was up to comprehending Fire Nation royal politics. The Fire Prince was cuffed to the side of Nyla’s pen, because of course drunk-her thought that was a good idea.

“Good morning,” he said, which was pretty calm for a guy with a sleeping shirshu drooling on his shoulder.

“One of those,” she rasped.

Well, apparently she was doing this. What had she even said to get them on this ship?

* * *

They took Yon Rha north along the prison transport's usual route, because Katara hadn't wanted any special treatment, which meant no special expedited passage back to the capital. Aang had come on Appa to pick up Sokka and her dad, because they were needed for helping to draft proposals for the upcoming peace summit. If something truly catastrophic happened, they could come back for her, too.

She wanted this. Time out on the ocean, time for it to feel real. She didn't know if 'it' was the end of the war, that she was safe openly waterbending in front of Fire Nation soldiers; or that Yon Rha was finally being brought to justice, and the *Fire Lord* was the one making it possible. All of that, maybe.

They picked up criminals from a few islands too small to have their own long-term prisons—long-term prisons were a thing the Fire Nation had for all kinds of criminals, as if separating people from their communities would make them *less* likely to wrong people again when they were tossed back out.

Their ship crossed the ocean at its narrowest, and went up the colony side, too. There were less prisoners at those stops than their captain had expected. Still, Yon Rha had plenty of company down in the cells, most complaining just as loudly as he was. Petty thieves side-by-side with a murderer, and she couldn't tell by looking which of them would kill a little girl's mother.

They had one more stop; then they'd cross the ocean again, and head back to Caldera.

* * *

This was how Jun had gotten them on board, apparently. This conversation, more or less:

“Is that Prince Zuko?” asked the captain.

“Sure looks like him, doesn’t he?” said Drunk Jun.

One of the smugglers had raised their lantern a little higher. They’d all looked. Squinted, a little.

He didn’t. Look like a prince, that was. With his scruffy hair and too many bones showing under his skin, slung over her shoulder in his under robes, because Drunk Jun had stolen his very nice outer robe. Which she’d still been wearing when she’d woke up, and if she’d learned anything in her life it was to own her actions, no matter how many men’s clothes she ended up stealing while drunk. It had a dragon on the back: she looked *great.*

“Did you kidnap a street urchin?” one smuggler asked, like he had standards.

“Stole from someone he shouldn’t. I was going to take him in anyway, but I might just swing by the palace first, see if I can get some money off the guards there before his uncle comes out to ID him,” Drunk Jun said.

“Good luck,” the smuggler said, “but his scar’s on the wrong side. I just saw a play about—”

Princey headbutted the man. Not too hard, but still. Pretty impressive through the paralytic. Nyla gave him another little love tap, and he went back to being too-light deadweight.

“This is my prison?” he asked, when she dropped him on the cargo hold floor.

“The very best, Your Highness,” Drunk Jun said, and switched one of his cuffs over to the pen’s bars.

“...Right. I’m going to sleep,” he said, like *prison* and *sleep* went together.

He was out before she'd scrounged up a blanket for him. Drunk Jun found that weirdly endearing. Drunk Jun had questionable decision-making abilities, as previously established.

* * *

The prison transport docked at the Shinchiheisen colony, their last stop. It did not pick up a thief with a scar on the wrong side. It wouldn't have, but no one but Jun needed to know that. Katara certainly didn't. And no one on board got past the bowing port officials long enough to learn of anyone else worth noticing in that particular town.

From the deck, she could see a commotion on the beach. Some kind of search, but it was too far for her to make out.

Still, she sent a brief prayer to the Ocean spirit, that he might guide the one they'd lost. She sent another to Yue, just because.

* * *

La would have shared the joke with Tui, but he remembered, at the last moment, that she wasn't *his* Tui.

Yue would have shared the joke with La, but she didn't know the ocean could laugh.

* * *

The joke was this:

Nine hours into the smuggler's voyage, the Northern Tribe attacked.

“We’re not Fire Nation,” the smuggler’s captain tried to wheedle. “I just put that up to fool them. Look, we’ve got our Earth Kingdom flag right here—”

“Sink it,” the waterbender in charge ordered. He was a man. All their attackers were men, which was making Jun’s skin crawl under her fine new outer robe.

“Hey,” she shouted, drawing herself up as tall as she could. Her whip was encased in ice somewhere to the stern, but her tongue was still sharp. “My shirshu’s still in there, do you have any idea how much those cost—”

Because in Jun’s experience, most people responded better to money than to *do you know how long I’ve had her, do you understand how long it took to train her out of licking my face, do you know how warm she is to cuddle up with on the trail.*

* * *

Shirshu could claw through steel. This proved extremely useful in the minutes that followed.

They were less well adapted to artic swimming.

“Hey,” her master was shouting, somewhere her nose was too numb to smell. “Hey, you turn this boat around right now, *hey—”*

* * *

Three hours later, a certain prisoner transport met a similar fate, albeit to a different scout ship.

Or would have, if waterbending hadn’t been met by waterbending.

“What are you *doing?”* Katara demanded. “Are you trying to restart the war?”

“These are Fire Nation waters,” the ship’s captain said. “You have no right—”

The Northern Tribe disputed that. But in light of past friendship, they agreed to capture Master Katara’s ship intact, pending her messages to the Avatar and Fire Lord for further negotiations.

* * *

Zuko and Katara arrived in Agna Qel’a, approximately four hours apart.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone afraid for Nyla: you do not have to be afraid for Nyla.

Chapter 42: Arrival

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The crew, disgruntled passenger, and royal bycatch of the smuggler ship were brought to a processing room. It was near the docks, and the Water Tribe men inside were efficient.

"Sailing experience?" one of them asked Zuko, as others went down the same list of questions at the other tables.

"Three years," Zuko replied, wondering if he should be shivering more or less than he currently was.

"How many on steel ships?"

"Three years," he repeated.

"Good," said the man. No one was writing their answers down. Not since their names. Zuko's *Li* was written in Water Tribe script on a page in front of his own questioner. They hadn't asked what kanji he spelled it with, what meaning his parents had presumably put behind it. In their writing system, every Li was perfectly anonymous.

"I'm not Fire Nation," another man answered, "why would I have worked one of their ships?"

"Hmm," said his questioner.

"Sailing experience?" another Northern man was asking Jun.

“Two on a steel ship,” she lied, because she wasn’t an idiot.

“Are you a firebender?”

“No.” She didn’t even have to lie that time.

“No,” said Zuko, who also didn’t.

***

“You’re doing *what,”* said Katara, to a chief who wasn’t her own.

“If the other nations insist on the ownership of waters,” Arnook said, “then it is time they learned to respect ours.”

There was a new map in the chief’s council chambers. The oceans of the north, and the line drawn around them to mark what they now claimed. If his map makers had been aware of the lines that Fire and Earth drew through their own oceans, they had not included those details here.

“Do you think we’re attacking honest traders?” one of the councilmen scoffed. “It’s been a century since our docks have been this full. You’ll hear no complaints from them. The only prisoners we take are from military ships, pirates, and smugglers. Would you rather we hung them, like the Earth Kingdom would? We’ll put them to honest work here.”

“What were you doing on a military vessel, Master Katara?” Chief Arnook asked.

***

They were led along a rough trail outside the rebuilt city gates, on the expanse of ice that separated the walls from the surging ocean beyond. There was more ice outside their city than Zuko remembered. Which might have just been his lack of a coat talking, or the shoes he'd left back on that beach, or it might have been winter setting in. Jun, still wearing the richly embroidered coat she'd literally stolen off his back, shivered.

There was another walled area, placed outside the city. Its ice was less smooth, with no decorations. Like its more regal cousin, it too lacked any gate until the waterbenders with them made one.

Inside were waterbent huts, and prisoners who kept their heads down, and guards in shades of blue and purple.

And ships, great metal ships, scavenged from the ocean's bottom and held in dry dock here, ice supports cradling them upright. Zuko could see the flash of firebending even from here. The movements were familiar: three years experience on a steel ship, after all, and not one in good repair. The prisoners were welding. Sealing new steel sheets seamlessly in their places, while other prisoners hauled the crumpled ones away to be re-worked or re-forged. The sounds of hammers rang out from the only non-ice building inside their walled prison.

Jun looked at a secret she couldn't leave here knowing, and swore.

Zuko looked up at the open sky, and thought, *Could be worse.*

***

"We're working towards *peace,"* Katara said. "Which your—your—your *this* is not going to help. How can Iroh talk his people down from war when you're *attacking* them?"

"If the new Fire Lord can't control his navy's movements," Chief Arnook said, "he's not worth negotiating with."

“We’ll just wait until the next one is crowned,” one of the councilmen said, to general laughter.

***

They were taken into a supply building. Issued two sets of clothes. Boots, in their approximate size, and socks, and he gratefully pulled both on. Blankets next, in a surprisingly generous heap. All were as familiar to Zuko as the ships in dry dock: military-issue, completely up to regulation, if a bit stiff from being washed without being fully dried before their storage in arctic temperatures. The only difference from a Fire Nation depot was the ice shelving, and that he didn’t have to yell to get re-supplied.

He could still smell the salt on his new blankets. He looked up at the full shelves. There was… a lot more here than the number of prisoners he’d seen. Almost enough for a full fleet. The only thing they were missing was armor.

Anyone in armor when the ships sunk wouldn’t have needed their spare blankets.

“Is this supposed to keep us warm?” Jun protested, shivering under her second coat.

“The Fire Lord himself deemed them fit for you,” smiled the humorless tribesman in charge of supplies. “Who are we to argue?”

“Cheap bastard,” Jun muttered.

Zuko disagreed. Ozai would have had nothing to do with their soldiers’ provisioning; if their lives were too far below him to care about, their thread count certainly was.

***

Katara winced. “Did Ozai…?”

“Decline to negotiate?” said Arnook. “Yes. He was also quite clear that there could be no prisoner exchange, given how few prisoners of either North or South were still alive. He was as uninterested in other trade goods as we were in allowing Fire Nation ships into our waters to deliver them. If you think the new Fire Lord would be inclined to negotiate their return, I can certainly send a list of those captured with you. But to be clear, Master Katara, the bulk of these men are the same invaders who came here to do to my people what was done to yours. The Ocean showed mercy, and so did we. But our mercy is not forgiveness. Is yours?”

She… couldn’t argue with that.

Chapter End Notes

Courtesy note: my stories are never abandoned, please don't leave comments asking if they are. If you've enjoyed the story, try telling me something you liked without poking for more; that's the best way to encourage More Updates, from me and any other writer.

Chapter 43: Royalty Recognized

Chapter Summary

Things are going great at the Northern Watertribe's prison camp. Jun agrees.

Chapter Notes

Re Zuko's ship name: I've switched from the fanon "Wani" ("The Alligator") to "Wanyi" ("The Perchance"), because it's so very fitting for Zuko's quest. Suggested by Tuktuk in their podfic of Salvage. Their explanation: "Wànyī (萬一): Literally 'one in ten thousand,' 'perchance.' Used grammatically in Chinese to mean 'what if' or 'just in case.' I think a ship called 'The Perchance' is perfect for a boy clinging to false hope."

Katara spent the night on the Fire Nation prison transport, twitching awake at every chunk of ice to hit the hull. The officers around her slept even less. The city wall towered white above them, blocking out the moon. Fishing boats scuttled past, leaving through an entrance too short for them to attempt, returning to piers their own ship had been anchored well away from. The walls blocked the wind; they did nothing to block the cold. Katara huddled in her Fire Nation room with its Fire Nation bed in her Fire Nation clothes, and wished she was home.

Zuko spent the night in an ice hut too perfect to be the result of anything but bending. The prisoners already inside did little more than welcome him into their huddle of blankets on the floor, before the door was slid seamlessly shut behind him. Prisoners were not to leave at night. Zuko stared up through the thick ice ceiling to the distorted moon above, its light too dim to see the faces of those around him, and tried not to think about how much air each of the people around him was using. He kept his own breathing steady, and didn't move more than he had to. Body heat and breath warmed the space, until he drifted off. And if he jerked awake—

The moon was there. So were the others, warm around him. This wasn't home.

In the morning, Katara rode a sheet of her own ice into the city, and went to send messages she'd written last night.

“It’s too cold for birds to fly long distances,” she was told. “We’ll send them with the next merchant ship,” she was told.

In the morning, Zuko woke nose-to-nose with his former helmsman. Kyo squinted at him. Then he rolled over, muttering about ghosts.

Over in the women’s hut, Jun woke up with a foot digging into her kidneys from the shortest woman she’d ever met. This had no particular meaning to her, though she did get an elbow in, just to show the woman who was boss.

Katara went to work securing her ship’s freedom. This mostly involved trying to talk to the next man and the next who wouldn’t listen to her. Finally, she just tracked down Arnook between council meetings. It hadn’t helped yesterday, but she intended to make that his problem.

“You can’t just hold us here. I’ll—”

“What?” Arnook said, turning to look down at her with the eyes of a tired, tired man. “What exactly will you do, Master Katara? This is a matter of our tribe’s security. We can’t allow you to carry our plans to the Fire Nation.”

Waterbenders opened the igloos. Counted them up like inventory, then herded them outside to line up.

Zuko and Jun were sent to work.

Fire Nation prison transports did not carry many extra supplies. They had not, as it were, planned for their own indefinite detainment.

“Everyone here works for their meals,” Arnook informed her. “You, Master Katara, can help train our benders, or assist in the healing huts.”

Her Fire Nation acquaintances could go where the Northern Tribe was already offering hospitality to the Fire Nation.

Zuko was on a transport crew, set to pulling the heavy sledges from ship to forge and back again. Most of the non-bending men were on such work. There were fewer of them, relative to the benders; firebenders had stood a better chance of being pulled live from the water.

He was sweating under his new coat. That wasn't going to be good when he slowed enough for sweat to turn to ice. He stopped, panting, at the side of another ship.

"And what am I supposed to do with this?" said a voice as near to yelling as any prisoner would dare come. Any still-living prisoner, anyway. "It's still warped. I can weld; I can't turn a gap the size of a polar bear goose into… a…"

The voice trailed off. Zuko stared through sweaty bangs at his former engineer. The woman was standing on one of the platforms hanging from ropes all over the ship; it gave her enough added height to be taller than the guard she was aggressively not-yelling at. Barely.

"...a structurally sound ship," Engineer Hanako finished, pulling her gaze away. "Do you think we're working with wood? Do you think steel wants to float? Get me something flush with this hull, or you'll be sailing a lot closer to your Ocean spirit than you wanted—"

Aboard the prison transport, they counted supplies, and counted again. They had a week left, at this rate. Significantly longer, if they sent their own prisoners to the Water Tribe's camp.

It was send the prisoners now, or send everyone when their food ran out. Katara had always wondered what it looked like, when Fire Nation commanders rationalized lives away.

"Sort them," their captain decided, her hands gripping the table edge, her eyes closed. "Low-level offenders stay. Rape, murder, and attempts at such go to the camp."

"They haven't had a trial," her lieutenant said.

"Your objection will be noted in the record."

"The scar's on the wrong side, isn't it?" someone whispered, at dinner.

Lieutenant Jee looked up, and stared across the room into the face of a dead man. A dead teenager.

The dead teenager was wolf-sharking down the camp's fish stew like it didn't have the consistency and approximate salt content of the ocean.

"Oh," said Helmsman Kyo. "You can see him, too?"

"His name is Li," said Engineer Hanako, casually.

"…Then let's make sure everyone knows the scar really is on the wrong side," Lieutenant Jee said.

"Yes, Sir," his crew said, and got to work. Li was Li, and entirely separate from Prince Zuko. As the prince's former crewmates, they were the most trustworthy of sources on what His Highness looked like. And three years of Avatar hunting had left them well versed in how to

squash rumors before they reached the wrong ears. Stopping the tribesmen from hearing whispers of Prince Zuko wasn't half as hard as keeping word of spirits away from their former commander's ears. The Wanyi's crew were, after all, master rumorbenders.

Jee had never particularly liked his prince. But even the worst brats deserved a chance at growing up.

"What about her?" Engineer Hanako said, jerking a chin towards the other newcomer everyone was whispering about. The one who'd come in with the prince, and was wearing a coat fit for a noble.

Probably a bodyguard, Jee didn't say, because he wasn't fool enough to ruin a good ruse. Rumor had it that Li had come in without even a coat on his back. Meanwhile, the woman brought in with him had been wearing *that*. It couldn't be any more obvious that she was drawing attention from him.

"She's a noble, obviously," Jee said. "You've never heard of the Lady Jun?"

"Now that you mention it," said Hawker Genji.

"Apologies for my rudeness last night, Lady Jun," Engineer Hanako said that night, bowing low just as the guards were moving to seal them in, "I didn't recognize your ladyship in the dark. If there's anything I can do to make amends, Your Grace."

- - -

Before they were sealed in. Not after.

Jun looked down at the woman, at the Northern Tribesman staring straight at Jun over that bowed back, and thought, *Oh you mother—*

But she didn't have time to finish that, even in her head, because she now had the attention of the entire igloo's prisoners and their wardens besides. This woman wanted to play? They'd play.

Didn't matter that Jun didn't know what they were playing. Anyone who'd ever bet against Jun at a bar knew she didn't back down. If she didn't know the rules, she'd just change the game.

"Hm," said Jun, drawing herself up. She channeled every loftier-than-thou merchant she'd ever tried getting money out of. Added a dash of *prince who'd insulted the bathing habits of an entire tavern* on top. For authenticity. "I do require a new attendant. You'll do."

The short woman slanted her gaze up, even as she nominally stayed bowed. *You bi—* said the glint in her eye, before Jun dropped her royal coat on the woman's head.

"You're a firebender, I trust? Iron that. I'll need to be presentable when their chief realizes who they have."

The guards at the door clearly had about as much idea of who Lady Jun could be as Jun did. But they looked ready to go tell someone who got paid enough to deal with it. And Jun had never yet met an angle she couldn’t work.

Chapter 44: How to (Not) Make a Martyr

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jun's new attendant ironed her coat, through gritted teeth. Jun slept in it, got it nice and rumpled, and had her re-do it in the morning. Twice. The Lady Jun, whoever she was, wasn't one to accept anything less than the best.

When the guards came for her after the morning head count, she met them with crossed arms and raised chin.

"Finally," she said. "Attendant, come."

"He only wants you," the guard said.

"You expect me to follow you *unchaperoned?* Would you send your own daughters alone to the chambers of the Fire Lord?"

The guards looked at each other. Looked at the requested attendant. Looked farther down than they'd initially banked on. And decided, very clearly, that one more woman wouldn't be particularly hard to handle, if it came to it.

Attendant Hanako bristled. Jun sent her a *look*. A *don't ruin this for us,* from her eyeballs to the other woman's. Because Jun had seen the sliver of ship steel the woman was working into a shiv, and it was that shiv—and the kind of woman who made shivs under the guards' noses—that Jun wanted at her back. Which meant that right now, the Lady Jun needed a docile little attendant who *wouldn't* prompt a weapons search.

"Please," Hanako said, like pulling teeth, "allow me to accompany my lady."

They allowed it. Very gracious of them.

- - -

Katara escorted the Fire Nation prisoners over to the camp, because they weren't sure any Fire Nation officers sent with would have come back.

They had a room set up, meet for taking in multiple prisoners at once. They had a list of standard questions, prepared and practiced. They were particularly interested in previous ship experience or mechanical expertise. Almost as an afterthought, they asked about crimes.

They seemed pleased with Yon Rha's long years of service, his status as a firebender, his general cowed attitude as he answered each question promptly.

"What are you accused of?" the man questioning him asked.

"I was a soldier," Yon Rha said, like that explained it all. Like what he'd done was just *being a soldier;* like being a soldier was an excuse to begin with, when it was his own people who'd started the war, and chose every year to continue it, leaving their homes to murder people in their own.

"He killed my mother," Katara said.

The tribesman doing the questioning paused. "You saw him?"

"*Yes,"* she said.

"An enemy waterbender—" Yon Rha was saying, but his questioner had already set his coal stick down, and was gesturing to the guards on the room. They pulled the ex-commander from his chair, forcing him to stand and walk or be dragged.

“What are you doing?” Katara asked.

“Do you want him dead?” the questioner asked.

“Yes, no, I—”

He paused a moment. “Was your mother a fighter, like you?”

Another yes, another no—because she had been, what else was there to call what she’d done, but she wasn’t, and she didn’t, and that was how she’d won.

Katara hadn’t answered. Answer enough.

“Right,” the man said, jerking his chin to the other tribesman. They dragged Yon Rha outside, as his mouth kept running with the kind of pleas he himself had never listened to.

“What are you *doing?*” she asked again, but she already knew, even as she limpet-dogged them outside.

Outside, where any filth he left on their snow would be easier to bend clean.

“Kneeling or standing?” the tribesman asked.

“Wait,” Yon Rha begged, half laying in the snowbank they’d tossed him in.

“Kneeling, then,” he scoffed, and took up a bending stance. One she recognized—he was going to make an ice disk, the same kind she’d once sent towards Master Pakku’s head. With equal intent, and a lot more feeling. The man’s own bending was practiced and perfunctory as he moved. Calm. He’d seen something that should be done, and he was doing it.

"*Wait,"* Katara said, and she wasn't begging. And she wasn't calm. And she wasn't an *executioner*. She'd stood in the way, Yon Rha sniveling behind her, the ice disc that had been aimed for his neck shattered and half snow-buried where she'd redirected it into the ground.

"You *don't* want him dead?" the man asked, one eyebrow raised.

She did. She did, she did, she always had, he should have died the moment he tried to raise his hand against her mother, died when he first accepted command of a fleet of murderers, died as far back as he'd needed to in order to save all the lives he'd taken, with his hands or his orders or his indifference.

But that was the same for every Fire Nation soldier, every commander, every merchant grown fat on war and every factory worker building their tanks or ships, every farmer allowing their harvest to feed the bloody march of their troops, every noble, every *royal.* It was Zuko, and his sister. It was Iroh.

It was Ozai, in his cell in the earth kingdom, if it was any of them.

It was all of them.

"Not like this," she said, and did not move, and did not kick the man behind her who'd pressed his forehead to the snow as he *thanked her.*

She hadn't understood why Aang had needed to leave Ozai alive. She'd known it was important to him, was glad he'd found a way, but—

But she hadn't understood, because Ozai deserved to die.

Yon Rha deserved to die.

But this wasn't about them.

"He's going to get a trial," she said. And it didn't matter if he repented, didn't matter at all what he said. "People are going to hear what he did."

They were going to know it wasn't special. *She* wasn't special, wasn't the only one who'd had a Fire Nation citizen step into her home and kill the people she loved. She was just the one with the ear of the Avatar, and their Fire Lord.

"They're going to *face* it," she said, "and judge it, and we're not going to make it as easy as saying *we killed him for you, so now you don't need to think about it.*"

Maybe they'd even rally against Yon Rha's death, be *angry* that the Water Tribes had murdered in cold blood such a distinguished veteran, such a patriot to their nation, with the righteousness of those who'd always been privileged enough to know that laws—that human *decency*—applied to them. That no one would come into *their* homes, drag them out, kill them and walk away to live a full and happy life afterwards.

Or a pathetic life. But that was Yon Rha's own fault. He'd taken her mother's life, and not even done anything with his own.

"I'm not bringing him to the Fire Nation to die." It didn't matter to her if he did, either way, and that was… that was so, so freeing. "I'm bringing him to the Fire Nation so they can judge themselves guilty."

They had to know they'd been wrong—had to admit it—or they would never change.

The fire nation won the war, Zuko had told them, as his prelude to peace talks.

They had. But that didn't make them *right.*

“He’s mine to kill, if he’s anyone’s,” Katara said. “And I say, keep his miserable, pathetic self alive for his nation to judge.”

“And when they let him go free?” the tribesman asked.

“*If* they do,” Katara said, eyes on the ship stacks rising just above the prison’s walls, "then I’ll be back. For now, these are *not* your prisoners. They’re mine. And I’ll be checking on them every day until I can take them back for justice.”

And she’d be checking in on their other prisoners, too.

“You’ll need the chief’s permission,” the man said.

“I’ll get it.”

And she went to do just that, leaving Yon Rha sniveling in the snow behind her, too pathetic and too alive to be any nation’s martyr.

- - -

“Chief Arnook is in a meeting,” she was told. “With Lady Jun of Shinchiheisen.”

“…With *who?*”

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: Yon Rha had been scheduled to die in this chapter since the beginning, but I now very much see how the writers of The Southern Raiders got where they did. Katara gonna Katara, and we love that for her. No martyrs getting posthumously elevated into

national symbols of unity against the Water Tribes, here. Only pathetic men needing a real trial.

Chapter 45: Contract Bargaining 101 with Lady Jun, B.S.

Jun and her attendant were brought before a council populated entirely by old men. Great start. But honestly? Not that far off from how most of her contracts began. She'd be road-scruffy and black-clad, packing assets they were more used to seeing on their mistresses; they'd be important and wealthy and wondering why the fearsome bounty hunter their secretary had hired wasn't a man. But she still got their money in the end, every time.

The Lady Jun bowed like a noble. Which was to say: not much.

Should she play at being demure? Probably. You didn't get a ruling council looking like *that* because they liked their women talking to them straight.

But since *demure* clearly wasn't working for their own gals, Jun was going to be Jun.

She straightened, locked eyes with the one in the middle—usually a good bet—and raised an eyebrow.

"So you've captured me. Now what?"

Ah, murmurings. Always a sign she'd kicked someone else off their game. Multiple someones, in this case.

The middle guy, whose coat had slightly more embroidery than the two nearest guys, did not join in the muttering. He spoke first, which meant she'd pegged their leader correctly.

"Perhaps," he said, "you could begin by telling us who you are."

She snorted. She didn't try to make it pretty. And then, she did what anyone would do: started padding her resume.

“Jun of Shinchiheisen, daughter of Shoukin and Doroko. I have been confidant to Fire Lords past and present, the one they sought out when needing guidance.”

She found the Avatar for Prince Brat and Uncle Fatso. Pretty confidential, definitely guidance, and that was Fire Lords plural right there. She wasn’t lying; she was interviewing.

“You were brought in on a common merchant vessel,” one of them challenged.

“I was traveling to Caldera on a task Fire Lord Iroh ordered. I didn’t want to be intercepted.” She raised an eyebrow. “But here we are. So: now what?”

“It doesn’t make any difference,” another said. He’d turned to talk to Leader Guy, instead of her. Yeah. That wasn’t going to fly.

Whelp. Go big or go out in a blaze of shoving her shiv-welding attendant between her and them as she ran, she guessed.

“Of course it doesn’t,” she talked right over Doesn’t-Make-A-Difference man. “Because you’re going to kill us all, and the ocean—or the vulture-otters—will deal with the evidence of all our deaths for you, when you’re done having us fix your little fleet.”

…Yeah. Yeah, she had their attention. And her attendant’s *why are you calling them on it stop calling them on it* stomp on her toes.

Jun wore steel-toed boots for a reason.

Leader Guy steepled his fingers. “Your position won’t protect you here.”

Which was about as far from saying *"Oh no, we're definitely not going to kill you all through malnutrition, exposure, and a final bit of straight up murder, don't worry about it"* as he could have possibly gotten. Not that she'd needed it confirmed. Not that anyone with half a brain and one glimpse at that camp did.

"Believe me," she said, "I'm aware. But *your* position isn't looking so great, either. You really want to come down wrong on *both* sides of this civil war?"

"We aren't looking to ally with anyone from the Fire Nation, no."

Oh, he thought he was cool saying that, holding her gaze as he did. What a big boy.

Jun rested her hand on her hip, where her whip should have been. She missed it. "Uh-huh. So what's your plan for coal? The coal you need for your shiny new refurbished ships?"

"We'll take what we need," one of the adviser guys said. One kind of towards the end of their line. "The Fire Nation always did."

But the rest of them did an uneasy chair shuffle, like that was an argument they'd been chasing their tails even before her. She kept her eyes locked on Leader Guy's. Then she very deliberately shifted her gaze to the idiot.

"You and what army?" she asked.

His mouth opened.

She held a finger up, right against her lips. She missed her lipstick, too. "Ssh," she said. Then looked back to their leader. "You. You're their chief, right? You're planning to, what, have your people *also* colonize the colonies? Get some more prisoners, stick them in the mines?"

"It's what the Fire Nation—" idiot started to shout.

“Sssh,” she shushed him harder. “Or—and this is the part where not killing me comes in—do you just want a nice steady *uncontested* source of coal that you can just cart back north, to keep defending your own borders? Because”—and here came the sales pitch—“I can do that for you.”

Their chief narrowed his eyes. “Explain.”

He was ordering her around now, instead of just talking at her. The start of a beautiful business relationship.

Hopefully.

“I’ve been the confidant of Fire Lords,” she repeated. “Plural. One of them’s in Caldera. The other one? Should be safe and sound in Shinchiheisen. My very own port of call. And there’s a lot of people back there who are feeling just as fondly about the Home Islands as you are. And I’d bet at least a few of the people you have here—myself included—have family there. Family sitting on a surplus of coal, now that stopping shipments to the Home Islands is going to be the next step in any fight for independence. I’ll write to them. I don’t need to tell anyone about any scavenged ships or whatever else you’ve got going on up here. But let me talk ransoms. Maybe even friendship.”

“As if we’d—” idiot started again.

It was their chief who put up a hand to stall him, this time. Whatever discussions his council was about to have, they wouldn’t be doing it out in front of her. A client alone was easy to pressure into a deal. A whole gaggle of them? They’d want time to *talk.*

“We have no proof you are who you say you are,” Chiefy said.

“Paper,” she said, snapping her fingers, like she expected it to manifest right this instant. “And ink. I’ll write to the governor. Or should I take this straight to the Fire Lord?”

Fire Lord Iroh had copped a feel while she'd been paralyzed. He owed her one, even without tossing his nephew in as a cherry-plum on top.

…His nephew, who Iroh might or might not want in his custody to bury him where no rebellion would ever find. The north's charming prison camp, Jun noted, would be a *great* place to disappear him. One that came with national outrage and national unity on top, if he spun it right.

She was eternallyglad she wasn't a real Fire Nation noble. Just thinking about this as *Lady Jun* was filling her head with snake-wolves. Venomous ones.

"…Though if you're looking for ransom in the form of a steady supply of coal, we should start with the governor," Jun said, because she'd worked for him, too, and not gotten groped. And he *definitely* wanted his puppet prince alive.

"We will discuss it," said their chief, eyes still narrowed, which wasn't a no.

First rule in contract bargaining: if they didn't say no, up things until they did. Clients *liked* to say no. Made them feel in charge. Everyone liked to lord it over someone.

She stuck up her chin. "I will, of course, be exempted from *manual labor*. Interceding on your behalf will already take more daylight than you've got up here. Speaking of: I'll need lamps. A writing desk. Proper seating, pillows or furs, not an ice floor. *Blankets.* On a bed. My own room in which to work, and one for my attendant. Not in that camp: you'll give me a room right here in the palace—"

"You will stay with the other prisoners," Chiefy barked.

"You think that's fit for me?"

"*I* decide what's fit for you, *Lady Jun*." Oh yeah, he felt good saying that. Probably grew a few chin hairs, putting her in her place.

"Of course," she said, taking a step back and bowing again, lower this time, all nice and cowed by his manly political might. "But I do need the rest, if you want me to get started on *verifying my identity.*"

More murmurings.

"We will read what terms you propose to send. Only what correspondence we approve—*if* we approve it at all—will be sent," he said, like that wasn't half her battle won already.

Give them a good *no* to lord over you, and all the other little details tended to turn into a *yes.*

"Of course, sir," she said. Clients always liked a good *sir*.

"Sir," one of the door guards said, as she was being dismissed. "Master Katara is here to see you."

Chiefy kept his eyes on Jun. "Let her in."

…Jun had the sudden, intense hope that *Katara* was a common Water Tribe name. Because the last time she heard *Katara,* it was the name of a girl she had slung over Nyla's back, on the way with Prince Bratty to that abbey—

(She missed Nyla, a lot more than she missed lipstick and whips.)

- - -

“Master Katara,” Chief Arnook welcomed her. With suspicious warmth. “You know the Lady Jun, of course.”

“…Do I?” asked Katara, stopping in the doorway. There were two women inside, on the opposite ends of the height spectrum. The shorter one was glaring at everyone; the taller one was looking down her nose. There was a metal hairpiece in her topknot, like the kind nobility wore, except that it was silver and… a skull? And she looked… familiar.

Katara squinted.

- - -

Sweat rolled down Jun’s back.

She doubled down.

“Ah, Avatar’s friend. We’ve met. At court.”

- - -

…*Lady Jun* did fit the Mai sort of aesthetic. And that coat was absolutely something a noble would have been wearing.

“Right,” Katara said, somewhat hesitantly.

“You will, of course,” the woman said, “insist on the safe return of me and my people. …For world peace.”

“Of *course,”* Katara agreed, with no hesitance at all.

- - -

The Lady Jun got her private igloo. It was tiny and sealed up just as tight when they didn't want her out, but hey, separate lodgings. With a token attempt at fur rugs so she wouldn't freeze to death at night. All for the price of having to magnificently BS a few letters. The real nobles would call her bluff immediately, of course, but as long as they didn't do it to the chief's face, as long as they could pick up on her oh-so-subtle undertones of *I've got your prince, I hear you like him alive,* then she was halfway out of here already. She knew Prince Zuko would be her meal ticket.

"Did you have to get me locked in here with you?" her attendant grumped. They had not given her a private room, but eh, that one hadn't been high on the priority list.

"Yeah," Jun said, "I did. I want a shiv, too. Get making. Chop chop."

"I hate you."

"Likewise, Attendant," she smiled. All teeth.

"My name is Hanako," the woman introduced herself properly, after nearly two day's delay.

"Nice to meet you, Hanako. I'll stick with 'Your Grace.'"

That got the woman working on her shivs, all right. Jun was a great motivator of people.

Chapter 46: Great Minds

Chapter Notes

> Credit for this chapter, and all chapters hence, go to the incredible wonderful chasingfigments, who CALLED MY BLUFF HOW VERY DARE (/tone of VERY POSITIVE AGONY) when I put Towards the Sun in the 2025 Fandom Trumps Hate event. Thanks to them, I am now doing the "finish this book of Towards the Sun by the end of 2025 while writing with a broken arm" challenge. LET'S GO.

While Katara stood in a council room, arguing with Chief Arnook on her right—or lack thereof—to check on the welfare of the camp's prisoners,

While Jun tried composing letters in her head, because they hadn't given her *nearly* enough paper to be making her mistakes in written form,

(While Hanako turned another scrap of metal into a shiv,)

Zuko stopped gulping his dinner down long enough to actually look around.

People were shivering. People who weren't just him. They were huddled together, hoods up, conversations low under the eyes of their guards. Zuko was cold on the outside of his skin, not just the inside, despite his army-issued coat. Zhao had been the kind of idiot to attack the greatest waterbending stronghold on a full moon in winter, and he'd outfitted his troops with that same blithe faith in Fire Nation superiority over the elements (or in the firmer belief that the only one the scholars would write about would be him; what were a few soldiers with frostbite worth, in the eyes of history?)

Which was to say: these coats were made for Fire Nation soldiers based out of Fire Nation ships. Ships where crewmen could duck into the boiler room after their shifts and warm back up. They weren't made for living and working and sleeping and eating on ice.

Zuko stood up. Scrubbed his bowl out with snow, and returned it to the clean stack. Walked up to a guard.

"I want to see the quartermaster," he said.

"No."

He sat back down.

(Most of his old crew were here, but none of them had shown any inclination to sit with him. Or talk to him. Which was fine, that was normal, that was what they'd done back on the *Wanyi,* too.)

(But did they really have to sit with the bounty hunter who'd kidnapped him?)

He waited. Dinner ended. Curfew came immediately afterwards. He waited to get in the back of the line as their guards escorted them to the men and women's igloos (...and a new special igloo for the bounty hunter?), then waited to slip away, into the quartermaster's building.

"Our clothes are too thin," Zuko said, "and the work too hard. We're going to freeze in our own sweat. You salvaged enough from the wrecks. Give us a change of clothes, so we can hang the other pair to dry while we sleep."

"How did you get in here?" the quartermaster said, which was not a constructive reply. Zuko crossed his arms.

He did not have to wait on the formal Water Tribe response. With how swift it was delivered, these men were probably fathers.

* * *

"What happened to you?" asked Helmsman Kyo, squinting at him in the darkness. The moon was a waxing crescent above, through the distortions in the ice.

"The usual," said Zuko.

Waterbender fists weren't as bad as a firebender's. Zuko, also as usual, learned nothing.

* * *

"Firebenders eat more," Zuko told the camp cook. "Especially when you have them bending all day. They need more food."

The man snorted. "Where do you think food comes from, up here? A trade caravan? A market?"

"Then let us fish. Or take us hunting. Or—"

The man was squinting at him. "Oh, you're the stupid kid. I can tell you don't need another hit on the head, so why don't you just take your bowl and sit down?"

Zuko didn't see why people always thought recent head injuries could explain his actions. He hadn't failed a concussion test since he was ten.

"If you can't feed us," he said, "you shouldn't keep us."

"...Take your bowl, kid," the cook said, with the air of someone saying *That was the plan.* "It's not like you're even a bender."

He might not be a bender anymore. But somewhere inside, he was starting to feel awfully warm.

He'd missed being angry.

* * *

They weren't allowed breaks. Or to work too slow. Zuko was young and new here and he'd liked being in the sunlight, so he'd hurried his loads out of the forge as soon as they were ready. He'd been making the older prisoners look bad.

"Oops," Zuko said, as the steel beam slammed down just shy of the guard's foot.

Miss. But it still worked, for getting them to leave his former crewman alone. The only one allowed to berate Lieutenant Jee was him.

* * *

"Could your little gang keep him from getting new bruises," Jun hissed to her attendant, "for two consecutive days?"

This thoroughly confirmed her role as the prince's undercover bodyguard. The crew of the *Wanyi* knew all about getting paid to care for that brat.

* * *

Bodyguard shmodyguard. The prince was Jun's bargaining chip. If the Fire Nation had cared about any of the other schmucks stuck up here, they'd already be negotiating their release. Her first job was to *make* them care, so she could ride the prince's coat tails out of here.

Now if she could figure out how to word this letter, so the governor of Shinchiheisen would know she had his prince up here, and that ransoming some low-ranking, totally inconsequential prisoners—along with Lady Jun, of course—would be in his best interests.

* * *

"...And they won't even let me in to look," Katara said, grinding her current ingredients to a finer paste than the recipe called for, "which is how I know it's bad. Do they let you in?"

"No," said Yagoda. "They haven't called on the healers since the prisoners were moved to the camp."

"What about the other women? Are any of them guards?"

Yagoda's hand slowed on her pestle for just a moment. "Hand me the thornleaf? Thank you, dear. Katara, what do you mean, when you say 'the other women'?"

"The ones training to fight," she said.

"Mmm," said her teacher, crumbling the dried leaves over her own bowl.

Katara stopped liquifying her paste. "Yagoda? Who else started training to fight?"

"You weren't from the North," Yagoda said, her liver-spotted hands steady. "You came in fighting, and you didn't stop. Clearly you were an exception, as a Southern woman. Men like

their exceptions. Makes it easy, to show that the rest of us really don't have the spirit for fighting, after all."

"But. You do." She'd met so many other healers, gossiped with so many other girls in her classes, answered their questions on what training with the boys was like—they'd been so excited to start for themselves, once the masters weren't focused on preparing their men for battle. They'd still been excited, when she'd left.

She'd left. And so had Pakku, headed to the south; the only master who'd actually accepted a female student.

"They won't even let them try?"

"Oh, they let them try," Yagoda said.

And let them fail, went unspoken.

"Here. A little less finely, this time. It stores longer when the pieces aren't quite so… tenderized."

Katara flushed. "Yes, Healer Yagoda."

Healer. Not master.

…Master Pakku had gone south, after the battle up here. With medicines and supplies and man power enough to help the Southern Tribes start rebuilding.

Her hand stilled on the pestle.

What, exactly, *would* northern men rebuild in the South?

"...Are you feeling all right, Katara?"

"No," she said. "No, I'm not."

What *could* they rebuild? Even with the best of intentions, the Northerners only knew the North.

When they thought of rebuilding homes, were they picturing their ice houses, instead of her people's winter igloos and the herding tribes' yurts? Did they think the South would give up their seasonal camps, give up following the salmon-seals and tending the berry groves, if they built one big city for everyone?

When they found new benders among the children, would they even think to ask the elders what southern bending had been like?

Katara knew her father was on his way home. Him, and his men, from all their different tribes.

But Pakku and his men had been there for nearly a year.

She didn't want to find a Northern colony where she thought she'd left her home.

Yagoda set Katara's hands to creating more salves, more ointments, to boiling and bending dry and rolling up bandages for their next use. She talked of births and broken arms and a fish hook stuck in a thumb, which had nothing on Sokka's *two* fish hooks, and they were both still laughing as she left. Just like she'd still been able to laugh with a hundred years of war, and no mother, and then no father.

The night sky was clear of clouds, and the world colder for it. Yue hung half full and untouchable overhead. Katara's breath puffed white into the air, in clouds she could feel turning to glittering ice. Down the street, across the city, stood the white wall that had only stopped the Fire Nation for a day. Beyond it was the wall of the prison camp, which was doing a much better job.

…What could she do?

* * *

They were feeding him. (And he actually felt hungry again.) He got to see the sun all day, and even the moon at night (even if it was through ice blocks set with the same breathless seamlessness as earthbent stone).

It wasn't the worst prison Zuko had ever been in. But he wasn't expected to survive here, either.

And he wasn't alone, this time.

But what could he do?

* * *

Jun was practicing her characters on one of her attendent's shivs. She had to get this courtly handwriting thing down, and the ink wiped off the rust real nice.

"Please go to sleep," groaned Hanako.

"Nu-uh," said Jun. "I want to get this right. And I like wasting their lamp oil."

"Ugh," the other woman said, because she couldn't argue with that.

* * *

Katara stared at Fire Navy smoke stacks, just barely topping the walls.

* * *

Zuko looked at the dark outlines of nearly repaired steamers, and the moon beyond, all of them wobbly through the ice.

* * *

Now there…

* * *

…was an idea.

* * *

She made her way back to her own little Fire Nation ship, thinking less of Sokka's two fish hooks, and more of the time he'd gotten two clam-doves with one stone.

* * *

If he didn't act, they might all die.

* * *

If she didn't, she'd be abandoning them all.

* * *

…He could just leave them. He wasn't their Fire Lord anymore; he'd barely even been their prince. They weren't actually…

* * *

…her responsibility.

* * *

He could probably get out alone. Azula might kill him, if he didn't.

The sun was coming up again, somewhere over the camp's wall. They were still in shadow, but they wouldn't be for long.

…He'd *better* get back to Azula, before he could see the flames from here.

* * *

She could wait it out. It wasn't likely they'd hurt her.

(Just everyone she'd come with, and everyone in the camps, and all the women they'd never allow to be anything but what they were keeping them as, and…)

She—

* * *

—couldn't. He just couldn't.

* * *

“Perfect,” Jun declared, holding aloft the best calligraphy of her life. She hadn’t even smudged up the paper, either.

“I’m going to murder you in your sleep,” Hanako said.

“Mama always said that’s the best way to die.”

“Ugh.”

* * *

“I want to help you,” Katara said.

“With what?” asked Yagoda, looking far more rested.

“With getting out everyone who wants to leave.”

Because she’d been allowed to fight; because women from the Southern Tribe had been classed as different; because they’d made her an *exception.* Well. The Southern Tribe was recruiting.

Yagoda's smile was old and wrinkled and beautiful.

Operation Kanna was a go.

* * *

And besides. Someone finally needed Zuko’s help to escape.

“I need your help,” he whispered, to the people who’d once been his crew, “to fake my death.”

Some rescue plans were better than others.

* * *

“Did you hear? That kid with the scar is dead.”

“That figures,” said someone else.

“Fuck,” said Jun.

She had her perfect letter sent anyway. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d collected off a dead mark.

Chapter 47: How to Kill Your Fire Prince, A Guide By Lt Jee and the Crew of the Wanyi, Not That They've Ever Thought About It

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is how his death started: Zuko's foot skidded. On his shoulders were the ropes of another sledge, loaded down with ship steel; under his foot, the track of every sledge before, worn so deep in the snow they'd finally hit ice. A shadow darted in the water below, fast as wiping sweat from his face. Another went past, more leisurely.

Turtle seals.

Anyone familiar with Zuko now knows the conclusion of these events.

- - -

He strained at the ropes of the next sledge, and the next; just off the tracks, widening the view to below.

The seals went past regularly.

They were faster going towards the city than they were coming back from it. The currents were right.

And anyway, he'd have a shorter distance to swim, this time.

- - -

“You want what,” said Lieutenant Jee, in the darkness of a locked-together-in-an-ice-prison night.

“To fake my death,” Zuko repeated.

“By dropping you into polar waters,” the lieutenant repeated, like Zuko wasn’t making sense.

Zuko didn’t see what was so hard about the phrase ‘faking my death.’

(Lieutenant Jee was having trouble with the “faking” part, in conjunction with the “polar waters” part. Polar waters were, in the Lieutenant’s experience, prone to authenticity.)

“I’ve done it before,” Zuko said.

“Was it any smarter then?” the lieutenant asked.

“None of us are going to make it out of here if we stay. If I can get out, I might be able to *do* something. So with due respect, lieutenant, shut up.”

It was the first time the prince had offered him his due respect. What else could an officer do, but agree to drown his superior.

(There’d been too many Blue Spirit sightings around ports where the *Wanyi* docked for Jee to say the brat couldn’t do anything out there. And General Iroh had been famously unable to track the dead down in the spirit world: therefore, Jee was safe from being killed again, if this went wrong. Besides, the prince had that breath of fire trick the general had taught him. He stood a better chance than the rest of them at taking this particular escape route.)

(Zuko wasn’t thinking about how he’d gotten out, last time. And anyway, he’d only *needed* his bending at the very end.)

- - -

The next day saw a certain Kuzon-of-Venn diagram overlap between “former members of the Wanyi” and “firebenders”, stomping back and forth over the well worn ice tracks with as many complaints on the quality of today’s steel as the guards would let them get away with. They fairly steamed with their anger.

Crick, went the ice, under the next load.

Jee helped load one more steel sheet on the prince’s sledge than would typically be advised.

“Last chance to not be an idiot,” Jee said.

Zuko had never in his life taken that chance. He strained at the ropes, and only glared a little when Jee gave a shove from the back to get him moving.

“See you, Lieutenant,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” said Jee.

CRACK, said the ice, with more confidence.

And then there was water. More than how cold they were, Zuko had forgotten how much polar waters *burned.*

- - -

“Well, polar shit,” one guard said, at a safe distance from the new hole in their work camp. He’d made a token effort to bend back the prisoner, but that was one fast current down there.

“Not how I thought that idiot was going to die,” observed another.

“Arf,” agreed a turtle seal, who’d taken advantage of this new breathing hole.

Such breaks were rare between the coast and the city, as any pinniped could have advised. Alas, none had been consulted.

- - -

The sledge had dragged him down, down, the rope caught around his arm until he found that shiv Hanako had slipped him—*for luck*—and cut it, then—

bump

bump thump bump

Turtle seal after turtle seal collided with him, spinning him, swimming as fast as they could go away from—

Oh.

- - -

A shadow passed under the cracked ice, like a thundercloud eclipsing the sun.

“...I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Helmsman Kyo said, with the kind of optimism that hadn’t spared him from a work camp.

“Arf,” agreed the turtle seal, now shaking behind Jee’s legs.

- - -

The Greenland leopard seal swum leisurely forward, its mouth open almost casually. As the ice tunnel was only slightly wider than it was, this was a valid hunting strategy.

Zuko grabbed onto the shell of the next turtle seal that bumped him.

It was the last, a huge old grandma with a scarred shell, and she’d been the slowest *before* a teenager had grabbed on. Zuko kicked and kicked like that could get them going any faster, because if they *didn’t* get faster he’d be kicking a *seal leopard shark* soon, and—

—and he really shouldn’t laugh—

—but the part of this he’d been dreading hadn’t been the cold or the wet or the dark but the need for air, like days in a cell all compressed down to a few awful minutes.

But here it was, he’d found it: something more pressing than the need for *air*.

Ozai should have employed shark seals in his court. Non-metaphorical ones.

They were past the hole in the ice. Past the snow that the sledges had cleared. The light dimmed and darkened and was left behind, was blotted out, and he wouldn’t know when to kick the thing hunting them until he felt its *teeth*—

Arf, he heard, muffled through the water, which didn't make sense because turtle seals didn't bark under—

Sploosh

His old grandma of a turtle joined the rest in leaping up, onto an ice ledge, and he felt a moment of relief as the cold air struck his face until—

SPLASH

Because of course a leopard seal shark could leave the water, too. He should have known better than to hope, by now.

All around him, shells *clunk-thunked* together as the turtle seals huddled closer, their backs to the intruder. Zuko clambered over them, into the press of their softer underbellies, as the rake of huge claws over keratin answered how his ride had gotten her scars.

There was—there was a *light,* a weird dangling line weaving back and forth outside of the circle of shells, and he realized it was some kind of parasite hanging from the shark's milky white eyes.

Like another blind person Zuko knew, the lack of vision didn't seem to slow it down. The smile was about the same, too.

Arf, the seals said, pressing all around him.

Rake, went the leopard seal shark's claws, trailing over them. Until they caught around the edge of the old grandmother's shell, and started dragging her back.

The hole she left in the circle was cold, was indefensible, was a moment from being filled with claws on *him* or the screams of an animal who'd helped him, however little she'd meant

to, and

And there'd been few enough people willing to do that, ever, that a turtle seal absolutely counted

And there were people back out there that needed him

And this was a stupid way to die, even for him, he could have just stayed in the fire nation and let Azula push him out a window or Iroh push him into politics

And he'd been ready to kick this shark in the face since he'd first seen it. Zuko had never been one to rethink a perfectly actionable plan.

His next panted breath came out warm—

Then *hot*—

He stood, pushing aside seal heads and flippers, taking aim for the sounds of struggling and that horrible dangling light

And kicked out the most pathetic shower of sparks known to man.

But in this lightless place, living in waters that fire never touched, those little fire flickers landing on the leopard seal shark's muzzle were enough to send it rearing back from its prey. With a final splash, it was gone.

Arf, said the old grandmother, peeking out from her shell. The last of the dying embers reflected in her eyes as she looked up at him.

Arf arf arf, agreed the others

...And then Zuko was being sat on by a pile of pinnipeds. This was a lot less cute with turtle seals than it had been with turtle ducks.

But it was warm even with his soaked clothes, and it was okay to rest.

A man needs his —

(Shut up, Uncle.)

Zuko breathed again. Easy, and warm.

- - -

“Fuck,” said June, around this time.

Her meal ticket was indeed sleeping with the sea life; just not in the way she thought.

- - -

When Zuko woke up, his clothes were still damp, but at least he was warm. And his eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness to spot its weakened edges: the dim gray direction where light was getting in.

He shoved his way through a tangle of sleepy arfers, and followed that light up into one of the overflow tunnels connected to the city’s canals.

- - -

Most people didn't lock their doors, in the northern capital. Maybe because they were one big happy community. Maybe because in a culture largely devoid of trade for the past hundred years, any stolen items would be handmade, and easily identified. Or maybe because their architecture was made of ice, and half the population could bend a new door if they really wanted to rob a place.

He got dry clothes from the first house. A water skin from the second. Food from the third. A parka from the sixth. The screaming baby in the fourth had been a way better deterrent than the polar pomeranian in the seventh, who'd gladly accepted a bribe of jerky from the fifth. There were two masks hanging on the wall above the pomeranian's doggie bed; Zuko added one to his collection, and spirited out.

He needed to find better places to steal from; storerooms, warehouses. He needed to study the guard rotations, in the city and the camp, needed to know which routes their patrol boats and fishers took, needed a map of the currents going south. Needed to figure out how to get tons of Fire Nation steel out of dry dock, or how to steal enough of those smaller wooden boats to get everyone out.

He'd never needed to get more than himself out of a place. ...Besides that thing with the Avatar. Hopefully this went better than that.

The wall wasn't as heavily manned as it had been during the invasion. The night was darker here than in Caldera; there were fewer lights from below to block out the ones from above.

"Hey," Zuko said awkwardly, to a moon that seemed to be glowing with particular intensity tonight. "Uh. Sorry, I'll try not to stay in your city long. And I won't go in your fish pond. Or tell anyone else where it is, I don't think Zhao really let a lot of people know, and most of them were drowned by your fish husband, so—uh. If you could just ignore me. I would appreciate that. And. I'd set up a shrine for you in the colonies? Not that I'm trying to bribe you, just Zhao *killed* you, and I don't think anyone ever apologized for that, so—"

The moon had the air of a teenage girl, with her chin in her hands and her feet kicking behind her.

Not having seen how the moon returned to the sky, Zuko did not understand this impression. At all.

Or why the ocean below was lapping the shore with a sort of vengeful anticipation.

A foot scuffed behind him. Zuko, one hand making sure his mask was in place, spun around.

And stared, at the masked face behind him.

- - -

Behind her own mask, Katara stared back.

Chapter End Notes

At 21 ft (6.4 m) long, Greenland sharks are among the largest living sharks! With lifespans estimated from 250-500 years, they're the longest living vertebrates on Earth! AND ALMOST EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM GETS THEIR EYES EATEN INTO BY PARASITIC COPEPODS THAT LOOOOVE CAMPING OUT ON CORNEAS! Particularly hopeful scientists posit that this may be a mutualistic relationship, where the copepod luminesces to attract prey for the shark.

Wouldn't that be nice of it. <3

A little nightlight, to replace all the light sharkie will never see. <3

This has been another visit to the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner.

PS: Don't ask *me* why there's a Greenland in my AtlA, ask Kuzon of Greenland.

Chapter 48: Mask Buddies

Chapter Notes

Credit for the various names of the Water Tribe women in this chapter go to: carolofthebell (for Sirka), esmeralda-anistasia (for Sanna), and ecoantics (for Apayauq, Naviyuk, and Chagluak). Thank you to everyone that sent one in, I may use more in the future! <3

Apayauq (an Inupiat name): Apayauq Reitan was the first trans woman to compete in the Iditarod
Naviyuk, the name of an Inupiaq poet
Chagluak (Yup'ik): "little mouse"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katara stared at the masked figure.

The masked figure stared back.

Then the masked figure *bolted,* and even though Katara bent herself an ice ramp while it was taking the stairs, it was still gone by the time her feet touched the hard-packed snow of the street below.

As carefully as she looked, she couldn't find its footprints in the shadows and the moonlight.

She'd heard the person speaking, though she'd been too far away for the words to make sense. But the voice had sounded... familiar.

There was a drainage hole, tucked down a little alleyway. She did not give it more than a glance.

The next day, Katara first heard the rumors of the dead prisoner. The *young* prisoner. The one a group of night guards just off their shift walked past her laughing about, like it was funny that someone who'd been fighting so hard to live would die by falling into an ice hole, cold and trapped and suffocating and—

And *eaten by a leopard seal shark*, and—

And she couldn't help the dead.

Those guards had been laughing, because that wasn't how they'd expected that particular prisoner to go. How *did* they expect their prisoners to go?

The prisoners with the best behavior, Chief Arnook's council told her, with great magnanimity, could be adopted into the tribe once true winter came. Most were only support staff, after all: those in the full armor of soldiers had generally drowned.

(As Zuko's crew were more inclined to dress code violations than the average soldier, they'd had the best survival rate in the fleet.)

Prisoners with good behavior could be adopted, eventually. The surly ones were in the spirits' hands.

Katara did not immediately break into the camp to rally the remaining prisoners. Because she was more experienced now than she had been, back on that prison barge. Because she didn't have an easy Appa escape route. Because she wasn't a Water Tribe girl trying to free Earth Kingdom citizens; she wore the same face that these prisoners feared.

Because she had more than them to worry about.

Yagoda led her, smiling, past the patients in the main healing wards. Into the back, where advanced training classes were sometimes held.

The women inside weren't smiling. Some of them were shifting nervously; some startled when the door opened; some were staring at her, with eyes she could have seen in a mirror.

"How are we getting out?" one such woman asked, before Katara could even start to convince them.

But of course, the first women Yagoda had gathered wouldn't need convincing.

She took in a breath. Let it out. Rounded her shoulders, (and made sure the door was iced shut and sound-proofed behind them,) and spoke.

"Do you know what they're building in the prison camp?"

Sirka and Sanna had wanted to learn to fight, just like her. Their instructors had let them, just as promised. Let them fight against the men their own ages—so as not to *insult* such strong women, by placing them in classes with mere children. Let them fight until they'd returned to the healing halls as patients rather than healers.

And when they and their fellow women had quietly dropped the lessons, one by one, that had been by their own choice. Women just didn't have the drive for combat bending.

"They blamed us for it," Sirka said. "When we brought it to the wives of the councilors, they blamed us for it. What had we been expecting, right?"

Sanna had lasted the longest. Her leg had needed to be reset twice to get it straight, but she'd kept the kink in her nose to remember them by.

"Probably a bad idea," she said, rubbing a finger over it. "It tanked my dowery price a little *too* much."

Katara had never noticed, before, how tight Northern betrothal necklaces were around their wearer's throats.

Chagluak's husband hadn't even let her try the classes. That was a thing husbands could do, here. Not because he didn't think she could learn, but because he was *concerned* for her. Because he'd known exactly how it would go for the rest.

"He wasn't wrong," Chagluak said, her hands balled into fists in her lap. "But that doesn't make any of this right."

Apayauq had wanted to see the world, but only married women and their husbands were being recruited to help repopulate the South. And the idea of marrying—of the *expectations* that would come with it—made her skin crawl.

"The single guys aren't going to be pushing out babies, either, but that isn't stopping *them* from going," she said.

Women who wanted more. Women who wanted to choose. Women who wanted to choose *no*. The ones in this room were, as they say, only the tip of the iceberg.

Yagoda, personally, would just like to spend her remaining time with an old friend. There were plenty of women up north, ones she'd trained personally, who could take up the mantle of head healer while she pursued a harmless little antarctic retirement. And if she happened to found an entirely new school of healing while she was at it, well. There were better ways to be remembered by history than trying to slay the moon.

“Wait. Why don’t we just take that ship you came in on?” Sanna asked.

“It’s too small,” Katara said, and flushed a little as the women looked around at their own small group, then back to her. “I was hoping this would just be the start.”

“Me, too,” Chagluak said.

Murmurs of agreement.

“We could steal some of the fishing boats,” Sirka suggested.

“And leave the city to starve while they’re rebuilt?” asked Apayauq, whose family had helped build those boats for longer than this war had gone on, and who knew exactly how long it took to make them.

(She did not consider how much quicker that process might go, now that they had Earth Kingdom merchants to buy wood from, instead of waiting on the next humpback-clam hunt for the bones of a hull.)

The same went for the patrol ships: the other women didn’t want to cripple the North’s defenses. Not with the Fire Nation so unstable to their west, and the Earth Kingdom fracturing to their east. No matter how much Katara disagreed with how those ships were currently being used.

But the north had gone a hundred years without a steel fleet, and they could keep doing without.

“I know how our ships work,” Apayauq said. “But do any of you know how to sail those metal monstrosities?”

Katara took in a breath. Squared her shoulders. “The camp prisoners do.”

“You mean the soldiers,” Sanna said, deadpan.

And smugglers. And suspected criminals from her own literal prison transport. But that didn’t mean they deserved to be locked away for the rest of their—increasingly short—lives.

“That camp is wrong,” Katara said. “What they’re doing there is wrong. I want to take them with us.”

“...To the south?” Sirka asked.

“No,” she choked. “No, definitely not. But the nearest colony is only a week away by steam ship. We can leave them there. And on the way, they can teach us how to sail their ships.”

“Hmm,” said Sanna.

“And if they turn on us?” asked Apayauq.

“Then we’ll be surrounded by water. And I was already planning to teach every woman with us how to fight.”

That lit a fire in Apayauq’s eyes. “When can we start?”

“Right now,” said Katara, while she had them.

And in a classroom meant for waterbending training, if of a very different sort, Katara gave her first lesson to a very eager group of students. They didn't learn as quickly as Aang, but they were significantly more focused.

Afterwards, while they chattered and bent the sweat off themselves and otherwise tried to look presentable before they left, Sanna approached her again.

"So we'll get the prisoners out of there, and they'll teach us," she said. And paused, holding Katara's gaze. "It's a good deal. How are we going to tell them about it?"

Katara went to Arnook's council chamber. Again. To ask, again, for permission to see the prisoners.

Because if she stopped asking, they were going to remember that she was a master waterbender. And their prison's walls? Made of ice.

Katara was done asking Northern men for permission.

"Over there!" a guard shouted, as Katara hurriedly bent herself right back out. *How* had they noticed her so quickly—

"No, there!"

"It's *gone."*

“...It’s that kid,” said another. “I told you I saw him before, he’s *haunting* us—”

She let her forehead thump the ice in front of her, lightly. Contacting the prisoners. Was certainly going. Maybe she could—

A shadow leapt down from the unscalable ice wall and into the snow. Then it was running, and Katara was chasing after it, until—

Until it disappeared as thoroughly as any ghost. Katara stood panting near an open hole in the ice, where the shadow’s tracks abruptly ceased. A turtleseal *arfed* questioningly up at her.

...Katara waved a hand, bending away any trace of footprints before the guards could get out here to look for them.

Two sets of footprints. Hers, and the ghost’s.

The ghost was said to have twisted in death, its face now that of the snarling seal shark that had killed it, a classic symbol for vengeance in the stories the North told. It was said that Greenland leopard seal sharks needed to rest for weeks, buried on the beaches on which they were slain, so their restless spirits could be coaxed into returning to the waters. Any person who ate their meat while the spirit lingered would be struck down with illness.

...Katara squinted down at the stylized mask Yagoda had given her. It wasn’t easy to identify, for someone who’d grown up with entirely different carving traditions. But it *did* have fairly shark-seal-y teeth.

“Sorry,” she whispered to it, just in case there were any actual ghosts offended that she was imitating them.

The dead boy's body was, presumably, inside one such shark. They wouldn't be easing his spirit anytime soon.

Zuko's mask was of a black fish with a white dot on its forehead. There'd been a white one with a black dot, too, but that would have been easier to see in the night.

The Ocean was *extremely* offended at the imitation. Yue was only mildly miffed at being passed over.

Zuko knew the ships weren't ready. Knew there was nothing he could do to change that fact, not even as the nights got colder and colder. And even when they were, Zuko still didn't know how they were going to get one out of dry dock. Not without a whole lot of firebending, or some random waterbender going *oh you poor cold firebenders* and deciding to help them.

"Stop!" whisper-shouted the person who kept running around in a mask. Which wasn't something Zuko should be judging, but seriously, what was *their* excuse?

Zuko did not stop. Not even when the snow rose up to catch his running feet, which at least was better than them trying to trap him with *ice* or he might have broken an ankle. And his nose. He might have still broken his nose, between the ground and the hard mask on his face. He tried to bend it away, to heat the literal pile of snow until it melted, tried to remember the feeling of *needing* to survive because there were so many people (and a few seals) counting on him, but all he got was an even more pathetic palmful of sparks. The snow was far less intimidated by this than the leopard seal shark had been. So instead he kicked and kicked with his free leg, because even though his bending instructors had always discouraged it as plebeian, there was really a lot that just kicking things had done for Zuko in his life.

It wasn't until he was back in the safety of the turtleseal tunnels that he realized: the person in the mask. Was a random waterbender.

The person in the mask was a firebender.

There were very few explanations for that.

“Wait,” Katara called, loudly as she dared, the next time she caught sight of a figure in the night.

And it actually paused, for once; just the barest of moments, just on the edge of running.

“Let me help you,” she said, taking the chance. “This isn’t my first prison breakout.”

It wasn’t Zuko’s first, either.

And if he never took chances he’d... Well. Probably he’d have a whole face, still. But he didn’t think he’d like seeing himself in the mirror any better.

Zuko took in a deep breath, and did something even more stupid than following turtle seals: he opened his mouth.

“Do you want to steal some coats with me?”

The shadow's voice continued to be familiar. *Really* familiar. But as it would be frankly insane for Zuko to be here, Katara dismissed the thought.

"Yes," she said.

Divorcing "Zuko" from "completely insane" was a rookie Zuko mistake.

Zuko had no such difficulties recognizing Katara.

They settled on a rooftop overlooking the city and, farther on, the edge of the camp's wall. She'd thought about taking off her mask, but he definitely wasn't taking off his. And also he might jump off the roof if she moved too quickly. Or if she popped her cork again, and really, what was with firebenders and being able to hear that? Still: she took some advice from Toph, and moved her hands very clearly off her waterskin, lacing them in her lap so she wouldn't give *this* one a heart attack.

"It seems risky for just the two of us," she said, evenly.

"I've done more with less," he said, and she could practically hear his frown. "You're a waterbending master, aren't you?"

She had no idea why he would assume that a Northern woman was a master.

Except that he wasn't a Northern man, so why *wouldn't* he? And he was *right.*

Also, he was still talking. "We can't let them blame the prisoners for this. If we just snuck in and gave the clothes out quietly, they would think someone stole them. If they think a spirit did it..."

Katara knew a thing or two, about pretending to be a spirit. This time wouldn't even involve ecoterrorism.

She stood up, making sure her mask of sharky vengeance was in place. "We'll scare them so hard, they won't even think of taking them back."

The morning shift of guards approached an eerily silent camp. Not being idiots, they stopped approaching, and came back with twice their numbers. The walls seemed intact. The sun was shining brightly. The wind was still. The moon, who seemed to be clinging to the sky for just a few extra moments by her crescent fingernail, was still strengthening their bending.

They bent open the gates.

Red. Red red red, and bodies hanging with that same red lurching from their mouths, and *teeth,* such horrible horrible teeth—

It took a long moment to realize that the bodies were making muffled *mfph mfphs* behind the red gags tied over their mouths. And to realize that the man-sized shark-seal teeth pinning them to walls and ground and *just above the gate GAH* were just. Extremely detailed, extremely sharp ice sculptures, glittering in the sunlight, set in unmoving maws around their victims.

...Probably unmoving maws.

There was a great sigh of relief when the first set was bent back into the ground, with no more effort than regular ice.

The red everywhere was clothing. The spare Fire Nation shirts and pants and coats that had been sitting in storage were now draped and ice-pinned all over the camp with the unsettling tautness of flayed skin. Particularly over the prisoners' igloos.

"Hello? Is anyone out there?" a voice inside one of them called, with the distinct sound of someone who really, really wasn't sure of the answer. Or entirely sure they wanted to know.

...No firebender could have done this.

When they opened the igloos up, the prisoners were also in possession of new clothing. Particularly coats. Most were untouched, though a few shivering people were starting to pull them on, now that their doors were open.

"There was a lot of screaming," one man told them, with disconcerting honesty. "Then they started falling from the ceiling. There was a hole."

"...Like a mouth?" one guard asked. An educated guess, given all the teeth.

The man turned hollow eyes on him. "Have you ever seen a person get their arm bitten off?" He turned back to the igloo. Stared. "It bleeds slower than you'd think."

They did not ask further questions.

Crewman Teruko gave Kyo a fist bump behind the Northerner's backs. Helmsman Kyo, annual *Wanyi* spirit tale champion two and a half years running, bumped lightly back.

The attacked guards were brought into the healing halls, and examined thoroughly.

“There is no sign of physical injury to be found,” Yagoda reported, quite honestly. Any such signs had generally been to the back of the head, and had been quickly erased with a healing hand. Not to give up the ruse—and for no other reason—she and a select group of her healers had done very little to clear up the concussions underneath. She wasn’t entirely certain how Katara had done this, but the fact the girl had slept until noon was fairly telling.

“And in your opinion, Healer Yagoda, this was...?”

“Oh yes,” the woman who’d helped birth most of them said, with a tight smile. “It was certainly a spirit.”

One didn’t get to be as old as Yagoda without learning to lie lie lie.

One coat remained pinned to the ground longer than most, over the exact spot in the ice a certain teenager had fallen through. The guards stood staring down at it, despite it being rather in the way of their prisoners’ work.

Their prisoners were not doing much work this morning. Just standing there, looking equally as uncertain about this windfall of clothing as the guards were.

“Do you think he’s still cold?” Helmsman Kyo asked. “Do you think that’s why he gave these to us?”

The guards did not take back the clothes.

Katara was called before Arnook's council.

"What is the meaning of this?" one of them demanded, before the doors had even finished closing. But close, they did. And maybe she could take all of them, but she certainly couldn't do it *quietly,* not without her mask buddy running around knocking people out in the shadows as she terrorized them from the front—

"Why," Chief Arnook himself asked, "are we receiving a summons to peace talks, to be hosted by the Southern Tribe?"

...Oh.

"Because... that's where they'll be?" she answered.

The wrong answer, as it turned out.

"And how," Chief Arnook asked, looking directly at Katara, "was your home village selected?"

Because it gave Iroh an excuse to help them begin rebuilding out of the royal coffers immediately, no arguing with his council required. Because of all the surviving nations, the Southern Tribes had been hit the hardest. Because her village was where the end of the war had started.

Those weren't reasons that would interest the North.

"It would have been hard convincing the Earth Kingdom generals to attend a meeting in the Fire Nation," Katara said. "And we couldn't have guaranteed Iroh— Fire Lord Iroh's safety in the Earth Kingdom. I guess we could have picked Kyoshi Island, but we didn't think of it, and we didn't have anyone from there to ask if they would be willing. The South just made the most sense."

“So the Southern Tribe—” Arnook started.

Tribes, she didn’t correct him.

“—Is to be vastly overrepresented in the talk of reparations?”

If her people were *overrepresented* in the peace talks, that was only because so many of them had been *killed.*

“There’s no limit on how many representatives you can send,” she smiled, sweetly.

“As if such a backwater could even host a large party,” one of them scoffed.

“Excuse me?” she asked, less sweetly.

“Come now,” the same man said. “Water has always been one nation, and the North is where our culture still survives. Why else would you have needed to come to us for your training?”

She couldn’t argue about the training. But she could certainly argue about it being *her* culture. Maybe a hundred years ago the tribes had been closer, but—

...Was that why the North had closed itself off? Because it didn’t matter what happened to the South, as long as the *Water Tribe* survived?

“We should contact Pakku,” someone else was advising. “He’ll know more about what accommodations they can actually provide.”

Katara was dismissed. This was a broader statement than just this instance.

The Ocean nudged the waves. A little more. A *little* more. And suddenly, a turtle seal tunnel usually dry at low tide started to hear the lapping of waves, just as it also heard a certain face-stealing firebender's footsteps—

In the Spirit Oasis, a white fish bumped into a black one in the midst of all their circling, thoroughly ruining the Ocean's concentration. Yue wanted to see where this was going.

...The black fish bumped back. That had been the first time this new Tui had acknowledged it. On another plane of existence entirely, the water started rising around Yue's viewing cloud. It came higher and higher, until it should have spilled over, but very wobblingly did not.

She blinked at it.

And patted a spot next to her. A glob of water rolled out of the rest, and blobbed down next to her to watch.

La did not understand what its other half found entertaining in this. But it would try.

...Maybe Yue could try, too.

She let the tides rise just a *little* bit. The blob next to her wiggled in watery delight.

(~~Fire Lord~~ ~~Prince~~ Zuko had apologized to her. But until she got that shrine, she figured she was entitled to some *gentle reminders.)*

“...Why are you so wet?” Katara asked.

“I’m *not,”* the firebender huffed, drawing himself up. “I’m just... damp.”

“Damp,” she said.

“The tide came in fast. It must have been later than I’d thought.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and pulled the remaining water out of his pants and boots, before he lost the feet inside. She gathered up the water in a little blob between her hands, Which sent him stumbling back, and her efforts to reach out and steady him just made him flinch *harder.*

She tossed the water behind her. Held up her mittened hands.

“...Could you,” he asked, “not bend around my body? Or on it? Without permission?”

“Okay,” she said. And, “can we talk?”

So they did.

He *was* a prisoner. He was, in fact, the dead prisoner. Who wasn’t so dead, so she didn’t have to feel even a little bad about her mask.

He did not tell her his name.

“Are you just... helping us, to help?” he asked. Which was actually kind of nice, that he could be locked up in there, and still think a waterbender might help him with no ulterior motives.

It would have been nice if she could just say yes.

“I do want to help you. All of you. But,” she said, and her own mask hid her wince, “We need your help, too.”

“ ‘We’?”

So she told him. Without any more names or identifying information than he himself had given. Because at the end of the day, all he needed to know was that they were just as committed to getting out of here as his people were. They could make this work, together.

He nodded, slowly. And in the waxing light of Yue, Katara could see the glint of gold eyes through his mask. Which might have been important, if she hadn’t been realizing something else at the exact same moment.

“Wait. Are you living in the *drainage tunnels?”*

“Uh,” he said.

And bolted.

She did not overlook the storm drain, this time. But she didn’t follow him down, either. *This time.*

Zuko did not understand why there was water in *this* tunnel, which had always been dry, it was just there for extra canal drainage during storms—

He had no way of hearing Yue's giggles. High above and somewhere entirely to the left of the physical plane, the Moon was playing tug-of-war with the Ocean over whether or not to drown him.

As this was their first game, the Ocean went easy on her. This time.

Katara had been getting invitations to spar since she'd arrived, mostly from her former classmates.

It wasn't until one of them, fresh from picking himself up, asked if she'd like to come to dinner with his family that she realized they might not *just* be spars. But really, who wouldn't want a girl who could kick their butt?

(Katara's mental model of the typical teenage male brain consisted of: Sokka. End list.)

It was flattering, even if she didn't really have the time or the interest.

It was flattering, until she realized their fathers were watching her, too.

Katara was the daughter of the Southern Chief. They were sizing her up for marriage, for connections, just like they would have with Princess Yue. It didn't work that way in her tribe, they wouldn't even *have* a chief standing above all other chiefs once their war fleet disbanded, but it hadn't always worked that way in the North, either. There was a reason Arnook was a *chief* and not a *king*.

Maybe they didn't care about how it worked or didn't in her tribe. Maybe with enough Northerners moving South, they'd just overwrite her own tribe's history, and *make* it matter. Make one of their sons into the chief of the entire South, using her as their princess.

Katara pulled on her mask that night, and felt relief that no one could *look* at her.

Her mask buddy found her. "I need your help," he said.

"Yes."

A prisoner had been injured. One of the sledges carrying steel sheets had tipped over—had partially cracked through that same place another boy was said to have died—and pinned the man. His leg had been broken, badly.

This was not usually a death sentence. But he wasn't a bender, and he couldn't work, and frankly, the guards didn't *like* the guy. He was spooky.

(Helmsman Kyo, spirit tale champion two and a half years running, somewhat regretted his choices.)

"Huh," her mask buddy said, as they walked towards the camp in the near-darkness. He wasn't even trying to provide them a light; maybe the cold was affecting his bending.

"What?" Katara asked, maintaining the bubble around them. Another confused turtle seal swirled past on the outside, peering down at them.

"I thought this tunnel was longer."

...Katara had questions.

Helmsman Kyo somewhat regretted his choices. But, like any good member of the former prince's crew, he knew how to double down.

He hobbled his way to the sledge tracks, and just... stared. And stared. At the spot another prisoner had supposedly died.

"Am I going to be next?" he asked.

No one answered him. He seemed content with this. And with staring. And staring. And staring.

The guards side-eyed each other, but frankly, their economy was only just beginning to transition to arbitrary coinage and they were *not* being paid enough for this.

The prisoner stared up until the next sledge passed, and the ice cracked. And though the person pulling it was fast enough to jump clear of the spreading hole, the man with the broken leg certainly wasn't.

He was swallowed into the ocean without so much as a scream.

The guards. Continued to be spooked.

“Wow,” Kyo said, as he rode piggy-chicken-back on her mask buddy, peering up at the glowing gulper eel jellies floating gently around them. “This, uh. Sure is a long tunnel.”

“It was *fine,”* her mask buddy snapped.

Katara. Continued to have questions.

“Arf. Arf arf.”

“You’re living with *turtle seals?”*

“Arf.”

So now they were hiding an injured Fire Nation soldier—

“I was a helmsman. So. I didn’t actually fight much?”

—An injured Fire Nation helmsman in the back of the healing ward. With her mask buddy awkwardly hovering at the edges, like the turtle seals would be preferable to social interaction. Katara was making up a bed for him. She snapped a blanket straight, then punch-fluffed a pillow, maintaining direct eye-to-mask-contact the whole time, because anytime she glanced away he was a step closer to the exit.

“So what’s it like out there?” Apayauq asked.

“Out where?” the helmsman asked.

Apayauq twirled her wrist, in sort of an all-encompassing gesture. “The world. Or even just the Fire Nation. Wherever you’ve been.”

The helmsman sat up a little straighter in his own bed. “I’ve been pretty much everywhere. My ship was, uh. On special assignment. What do you want to know?”

“Everything.” said Apayauq.

“Walk us through the route south from here,” Sanna said, more practically.

...Katara had been watching them. And not her mask buddy. A cold draft still moved the hangings by the door.

She rage-bent a blanket down the next storm drain she saw.

“Arf.”

Zuko was not jealous of the turtleseal with the extra-warm-looking fur blanket. He *wasn’t.*

One of the councilors wanted to speak with her about the preparations to go south. He walked with her, asking perfectly reasonable questions on potential climate differences and what

flora and fauna he should avoid to not look like a fool by getting himself inconvenient rashes and/or mauled. Katara found herself unreasonably pleased to answer him, given that he was the only one who'd bothered asking. He segued into which animal hides and/or supplies would trade well, which she could also respect, because at least he was continuing to acknowledge that the South was different than the North.

And since he'd taken up so much of her time, would she like to join his family for dinner. He had a daughter around her age who he was thinking of bringing south with him.

She half suspected that he was going to surprise her with a son around her age, too, but he really only had the one child. And his wife had been experimenting with the newly imported Earth Kingdom spices in a way that was by turns delicious and atrocious, which made for more laughter than she'd had around a meal since she'd left Aang and the others behind.

His daughter was really curious about how the South treated its women, and his wife kept nudging him as Katara spoke of women on the elder's council and all the hunting they'd had to do while the men were gone, and how she was going to make sure the bending lessons she brought home were taught to everyone equally.

"It sounds *incredible,"* said the daughter, whose name was Naviyuk. "Where would you recommend building?"

"Building?" Katara echoed.

"Our trading house," the daughter said, excited. "Dad and I have been talking. I'm going to run our branch down South, while he handles the Northern end. We want to make sure to get set up someplace really good."

The Northern capital had been built up so long ago that not even a rising family like theirs could secure a better place; they could bend their house as fancy as they liked, but hadn't she noticed the long walk to their house from the palace? All the older families had chosen the best spots years ago, and passed them down to their children. But in a newly budding city, with the advice of the Chief's daughter, they could *be* one of those older families.

And they could, was the thing. Because in the South, she'd never heard of there being so many people in one place that all the "good spots" were already taken, before anyone else got there. And land just... staying in the same family. Forever.

"That's... not really how it works, in my tribe," Katara said. "We have a village, but we aren't there all year. Some of the herding tribes do it differently, but we travel around a lot. There wouldn't be enough *food* if we stayed there all year. "

"Well," Naviyuk said, "a proper trading port would fix the food problem."

"So would a proper fishing fleet," her father reflected. "Should we invest...?"

"One life-changing project at a time, dad," Naviyuk laughed, before turning back to Katara. "I'm really looking forward to working with you. The way you stood up to Master Pakku, how you just... just came in, and made them deal with you like an equal— You've been an inspiration to all of us. I can't wait to go South."

"Wow," Katara said, "This is going to be... such a change. For you."

The daughter beamed at her, radiant in her hopes of a future where she would be her own person, the equal of any man.

The equal of any Northern man, building up the South just how she'd been taught.

Katara smiled back, and tried not to feel sick.

Tragically, the winter illnesses had come early this year. Healer Yagoda had dedicated an entire hall—one of the larger ones—to isolating the patients, trying to curtail the spread. Only a select few healers were allowed access.

The Avatar's waterbending master was, of course, on this list. Particularly as she was still going back to that Fire Nation cruiser to sleep, and no one was particularly fussed on whether she got *those* people sick.

It wasn't even a lie, really; she was sure the Northern council *would* consider women who wanted to live their own lives a disease. And it was awfully contagious.

They'd cleared the beds from the center of the room. In the newly opened space, women—most of them young, but some certainly not—were practicing the moves she'd shown them. Ice cracked in the water basins they'd brought in, splintering and separating; a small scale test of what they'd need to pull off on a far grander scale, on the day they stole a ship.

"Hey," Sanna said, with a touch to her sleeve. "Can we talk? It's about my fiance."

"Oh no," Katara said, "don't worry, we have enough beds, you can stop being a *healer* and start being a *patient—"*

"That's not it," the other woman interrupted. "Turns out he's not really into this marriage, either. Or marriages in general. He's talking about us laying low on the next merchant ship south, and trying to start over in the Earth Kingdom."

"Oh," Katara blinked. "Are you... going to?"

"Actually. I was wondering," Sanna said, each sentence more reluctant than the last. Until they weren't, and they came tumbling out of her mouth. "If I could let him in on this. He's a good bender, and he's *really* not interested in marrying. Or women. Or men. Or— And he could help train the others, when you can't be here."

"He's..." A man. Which really didn't need stating.

So was the helmsman sitting there with Apayauq, his broken leg stretched out in front of him, walking her and some of the other women through how to read naval charts.

So was her mask buddy, holed up as close to the door as he could get, drawing ship diagrams so she didn't feel the urge to sneak back in and see them for herself.

"...Do you trust him?" Katara asked.

"Yeah," Sanna breathed. "Yeah, I think I do. I'll feel him out a little more. But I think he'd be wasted, disappearing into the Earth Kingdom."

"I trust you," Katara said, which was all they could do. Trust each other.

Something in Sanna's shoulders relaxed. She smiled, a little ruefully. "And while we're at it, my little sister's a non-bender. Are we... allowed to invite those? I know you're trying to rebuild the South, and obviously it's benders you're missing the most of—"

"Of *course* you can," Katara said.

It wasn't about men or women, or about learning combat bending. It was about...

About not wanting *this*.

Which. Was maybe something she needed to address, before she brought a whole ship of Northern-raised women (and fake fiancees, and non-bending little sisters) to the south.

Katara stood in the center of the room. Cleared her throat. "...Can I talk everyone?"

So she told them about her dinner with the councilor and his daughter.

And she told them about her fears of what Pakku and the other men who'd gone South, with the best of intentions, might have done with months of lead time.

"I know," she said, "that you didn't grow up in the South. Not even *I* grew up in the South, not the way it used to be—so much of what we did was different from the stories I heard, because we were trying so hard to hide from the raiders. I never saw the cliffs where we were supposed to welcome the salmon-seals, because the Fire Nation *catapulted* them. I never crossed to Whale Tail Island for trading, because the Fire Nation decided they *owned* it. But. But we still have the stories, while our elders are alive. And we don't have to do everything like it used to be, some of that won't make sense with how the world has changed, but— If you're willing to listen to the stories, too. If you're willing to learn from the people who are already there. If you're willing to try to make something better, together—then when you come South, you'll be a Southerner, too."

She took in a breath. Let it out. "And if you're not willing to listen. Then you're just a Northerner, trying to make a colony in someone else's home. You can come with us still, but please. Find somewhere else to settle. We could try to find you an island up north, or you could explore the Earth Kingdom, or you could even stay and help, until you figure out what you want to do. But I'm not bringing you with me to found a Northern colony; I'm bringing you with to rebuild the South."

"I admit," Apayauq said, "I have no clue what that really means. But I can try."

That's all Katara could ask for.

"Why don't you tell us more, about the South." Sanna prompted.

And Katara smiled. "The first thing you need to know, is it's not just one South. It's—it's the Seal Fox Tribe, which my village is just one part of. We stay mostly to the coast..."

She told them the story of the cliffs the Fire Nation had destroyed: how they would light fires every fall to welcome the salmon-seals back to their home rivers, and celebrate their return for three days and nights before catching the first. How she'd met members of the Honey-Reindeer herding tribes in the same fields her own tribe went to collect the plants only found

there; how they'd taught her that you should always ask a plant before harvesting it, and even then you should never collect the first of anything you found.

(And how the elders of both tribes had argued long into the night over whether certain plants should be harvested by pulling up the roots or only taking the leaves, and which resulted in thicker patches. Little Sokka had tried to lay out a Very Scientific research grid to test both theories, and he'd yell-reminded the harvesters for two years running that they could only pull roots from *that* patch and only cut leaves in *this* one, as he muttered over whether sunlight and relative rain on the slopes was affecting his data. The third year their mother had been killed before they could make the trip; they hadn't been back since. She wondered if the sticks he'd dragged into place were still there, marking out his grid. She wondered how the plants were doing, with so few people to tend them at all.)

She told them she wasn't a princess. That you couldn't marry someone to become a chief, because when a chief stepped down it was the tribe that chose its new leader. That chiefs could be women, even though it was rare.

"I bet we could fix that," Sanna said, with a smirk. "Chief Katara."

...She liked that better than princess, at least.

Katara heard rumors of the ghost again. She crossed her arms, and tapped a foot, and glowered through her mask the next time she spotted her mask buddy.

"...What?" he asked, freezing, half-way onto their roof.

"You worried me. Take backup next time, okay?"

That was her. She was backup.

“...Oh.”

So maybe the guards were still a little twitchy. So maybe she should have waited a few more nights before sneaking in to check on the ships. But she knew they were being modified for waterbenders, and she needed to see *how,* so she could start training herself and the other women on how to work with them—

Her mask buddy was waiting for her the next night, his own arms crossed.

“What happened to bringing backup?” he asked.

“...Oh,” she said.

He was also backup-shaped, now that she looked.

“I’m starting to think this job is cursed,” one guard said.

“I swear, it wasn’t the dead kid, the one I saw had the face of the *Ocean—”*

“...Do you think its angry that we took those ships back from it?”

“...We do not need a new Spooky Guy.”

The women were leaving for the night, the ones of them that weren't *too sick.* The rest were murmuring quietly as they settled in.

Her mask buddy was still here. He hadn't crept off while she was focused on training. He had, in fact, fallen asleep on his ship diagrams.

She reached for his shoulder...

But he slept with *turtle seals.*

She draped a blanket over him, instead, as gently as she could. He shifted; she held her breath.

"I have *enough* blankets, Uncle," he muttered, and pulled it closer, one hand gripping it tight.

His sleeve had shifted. She could see the skin underneath. The *burn* underneath, still healing, like he'd tried—and failed—to deflect a fire blast.

He was in a room full of healers, and he still had a burn. He knew *she* was a healer, and he still had one.

Katara aggressively piled blanket after blanket on top of him, until he was a big toasty pile of grumbles that kept pulling each one closer. And she didn't try to sneak a peek under his mask, or heal him, or do anything else to break the trust in her she'd thought he had.

He was still gone by morning.

“I’d like to heal your burn,” she said, the next time they met.

His shoulders jerked.

“Before it scars,” she said, and for some reason he relaxed.

But he was still *hesitating,* and she didn’t know why.

She’d offered to heal a burn of his before. He hadn’t gotten to answer her, then.

She hadn’t given him a choice, the next time. Not with Iroh holding him down and—

And would she still be offering, if she knew who he was?

She’d been working with him for days. She *did* know who he was. Taking off the mask would just make her think she knew.

“Thank you,” he said, and offered out his arm. She took it, her hands on his bare skin still mitten-warm, and pulled out a stream of faintly glowing water from the waterskin at her hip. He watched, making sure he kept breathing, as that water seemed to wash the puckered skin away. Like healing really was that easy.

He still didn’t know what he would have answered her, back in that cave.

She moved her water upwards, scowling as she realized how far the burn stretched, pushing his sleeve up once and then again and finally tugging down the collar of his coat and shirt to finish up at his neck. He held still as her hand hovered just above his skin, just below his mask.

Something above them flickered. His head jerked up. There was something wispy, like clouds, but it had been a clear night a moment ago. He squinted in suspicion, and—

And the sky burst into vibrant color and movement, blues and greens, ribbons of light that rained from the sky but never touched the ground. The northern lights.

He'd never seen them before. His crew had—the southern ones, at least—but no one had wanted to wake their shouty prince over a few pretty lights. They'd never come the nights Zuko had stayed up, training late and keeping one eye on the sky. But he'd read about them. Entirely inadequate accounts.

He wouldn't have been able to put this into words, either.

Her friend tilted his face up to the lights, and she didn't need to see under the mask to know his eyes were wide. She didn't need to see under his mask at all.

He didn't notice as she finished healing. She tugged his coat back in place for him. Turned her own face up.

"Do the spirit lights visit the Fire Nation?" she asked.

"No."

“I knew the poles were better,” she said.

He huffed next to her. But he never turned his eyes away.

They were as beautiful now as they had been back home. When she’d been a child, watching from her mother’s hood. They’d been beautiful a hundred years ago, before the war had even begun. They would be beautiful a hundred years from now, when her tribe was something she wouldn’t even recognize, but thriving all the same.

“So,” she said, “what’s our next move?”

“Food heist?” he offered.

“Food heist,” she nodded.

They were going to pull this off. Together.

This was a broader statement than just this instance.

Meanwhile, a certain blob of salt water was casually hiding behind Yue. She squinted at it, then back at the aurora. It was very beautiful; as a spirit, she had a view of the lights she'd never before seen. It was so much... more. More colors, more all-surrounding, more... giving the distinct impression, somewhere in its waggling lines, of someone pointing two fingers at their own eyes and then back at her.

Agni's messages always had a noticeable lag time. For instance, on the day of a certain Agni Kai, the more observant sages had noted a brief dimming of their patron approximately sixteen minutes and forty seconds after a loss in firebending power would have actually been helpful. For a solar flare slapped across space, a few days' lag would be about right. The

timing would, in fact, match up exactly with when a certain game of drown-the-ex-prince tug-of-war had begun.

(It was rather inconvenient, living in a different celestial timezone from one's sibling. ...Had Tui changed her hair?)

Chapter End Notes

The meat of Greenland sharks is SUPER TOXIC when fresh. Therefore it was traditional to bury it in the beach to drain and ferment for a few weeks. Wikipedia: hákarl.

This has been yet another visit to the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner: Greenland Sharks edition.

Katara's thoughts about plant harvesting (and Sokka's very Scientific Research Grid) were loosely based on the book Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer, which is a truly lovely read. For those interested in the results of Sokka's experiment, which was a real experiment done with the eponymous sweetgrass: either harvesting plants by pulling them up completely, or just harvesting the leaves, BOTH resulted in the plants flourishing when compared to patches left unattended by humans.

This has been a bonus visit to the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner: Humans Are Part of the Ecosystem Actually edition.

CHAPTER EDIT! When Agni appears at the end, that is entirely due to Syntia13's comment reminding me that auroras are caused by solar activity.

This has been a bonus bonus visit to the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner: Commenters Are Godly edition

Chapter 49: Our Lady of Prisoner Rights

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jun had been a bounty hunter for as long as she cared to remember. To ask if some of her catches haunted her was to be the same kind of moron that asked why she spent so much of her money on booze.

To say that the ex-prince was haunting her, though. Now that was getting into bad joke territory.

As if him dying in the most dramatic manner possible—freezing *and* drowning *and* eaten by a shark?—wasn't inconvenient already, him *coming back* was putting the whole camp on edge. The guards were jumping at shadows. Given that the days were getting shorter and shorter, and they were working into the night now, some of those shadows were prisoners.

Just about the only people not jumping were the ex-prince's ex-crew. Especially that one guy who kept telling spirit stories from their travels. Stories the rest of his crew invariably backed up, because they were lying little shits. And they kept *smirking* at her when no one else was looking, like there was a joke she should already know. She smirked back, because she could be a lying shit, too.

But she was getting real sick of a fake ghost getting people real bruises. How did she know it was fake? Because the only real things in this world were those that could get picked up by a shirshu's nose. And that had only ever led her to bodies; never ghosts.

So when the spooky guy started in on *another* story over dinner

And the guards were staring uneasily at the darkness outside

And some of them started gripping their weapons while looking *inside*

She was as done with this as she was getting. And what was the point in being a fake noble, if she couldn't order idiots around?

Lady Jun stood up in the middle of the mess tent. Slapped her hands down on a table.

(A guard had just come in, and the cold wind rushing in the door sent her fancy coat billowing nobly around her.)

"So you all think there's a ghost," she sneered. "So what? he's *our* ghost. Stop fucking worrying about it."

Which at least shut them up long enough for her to eat her water-and-salt soup in peace.

And that might have been the end of it

Except that that was the night the guards started screaming and didn't stop (until they did, until everything was silent) and the tops of their ice prisons opened up and bled clothes down the walls.

Fucking drama queen ghost.

...But it really was warmer, when she slipped on a third coat. (Over her other camp-issued one, and under her fancy coat. Lady Jun had *standards.)* Maybe she should have worked harder to get that kid a second one when he was still stomping all around, demanding that the prisoners deserved them.

(At no point, then or now, did she consider returning his own coat. Because it was Her Coat, now.)

And then, after the guards all got defrosted and replaced by other guards, and they'd herded the prisoners back to work—then, people started nodding at her. And half-bowing. Why. Why

were they doing that. She raised her chin back, and gave them her most modest smirk, but it didn't stop it from being deeply weird.

"You were right," one of them whispered. "He's *our* ghost."

"Of course," she said back, nice and haughty, because when someone says *you're right,* that was the only reply. And if she knew one thing about nobles, it was that they were always right. Lady Jun was no exception.

"We have received no reply to your letter," the Chief guy said, doing that thing big men did where they pretended to confuse statements with questions so if you answered—or didn't—they had an excuse to be angry with you, either way.

Of course they hadn't gotten a response. Letters from bounty hunters didn't typically rank gubernatorial attention. But Jun was hoping that some overworked secretary, sitting some place much warmer than here, was going to make an exception if she sent enough of them. Particularly given her recent dealings with the actual governor.

Regular Jun'd had dealings with him, that was. She was *Lady Jun,* while she was in front of these men. Lady Jun had all the confidence in the world, and the powerful family to back it up. One that cared about their daughter, she tacked on, while she was imagining things anyway.

So Lady Jun looked at Chiefy and his not-a-question, and raised an eyebrow. "Making you wait puts you in your place. What, did you think most of these prisoners *matter* to the Fire Nation? Did anyone even ask for them back, or were you the ones that sent the first letter?"

Oh boy, those faces said everything.

She waved a hand, smoothing that all away. “But you’ve got me, now. And I,” Lady Jun bluffed, “matter. They’ll reply. Let’s get your response in order.”

“We don’t even know what they’ll say,” one guy said.

She re-raised her eyebrow, and turned it on him. “Don’t you?”

Which got the smarter ones all talking over each other like they did. She just had to stand there, and smile like they were forgetting something.

The raised eyebrow worked a lot less well on the camp cook, who pointedly did not put more in her bowl.

“You really think we can live on this?” she said. They had a charming little stare off, right up until one of the guards prodded her along.

“Thank you for trying, my Lady,” someone said. Like she’d been doing it for all of them, not just her own sad little lunch.

“Someone has to,” she replied, in her best Lady Jun voice.

This apparently gave her fellow prisoners *expectations* about her, and how much she cared about anyone that wasn’t her. So when the guy who kept saying the creepiest things got his leg snapped under a sideways sledge, when they all knew that made him a slow-motion goner, they started *looking* at her. Like Lady Jun had done anything for them, ever. Like any noble ever had. But maybe she could swing a decent meal out of it.

“Tell your chief,” she said, to a guard, right in front of those lookers, “that I will speak with him over dinner tonight. He can choose: his place, or mine.” She let a mirthless smile curve her lips.

And hey, audacity win: they really *did* lead her into the city around the next meal break.

Audacity lose: they led her to his office. And as much as she channeled her inner shirshu, she couldn’t catch even a whiff of food here.

“You invited yourself to dinner with me,” the Chief said, sitting while she still stood, and looking deeply unimpressed. “Are you trying to seduce me?”

Straight to the point, then.

And clearly uninterested. Which saved her a whole lot of eyelash fluttering. Last time she’d had to pull that, she’d gotten an eyelid cramp.

“No,” she said. “I’m trying to get doctors into the camp. We’ve got a man with a broken leg. More than one case of frostbite, too. And there’s a cough spreading.”

“I was not under the impression Fire Nation nobles cared about our more *worthless* prisoners.”

He had her there.

“Will that be all?” he asked, doing the opposite of what he’d done last time: now he was asking a question, and making it a statement.

“Will we get a doctor?”

“Don’t try to arrange *dinner* again,” he said.

She was going to call that a maybe.

...And of course, the creepy guy had died while she was gone. Fell through the ice, just like a certain useless prince. *And* she’d missed dinner in the camp.

“You tried,” someone said, like it was the dead guy part she was upset about; like she needed consoling.

She didn’t. She needed a refund, needed to invoice someone for the time she’d put into fake caring for the guy, needed to make it an open tab because one guy drowning—no shark this time, at least—didn’t negate that they really *did* need doctors in here, before people started dying in even more preventable and potentially contagious-to-her-own-self ways.

Huh. Lady Jun was the kind of noble that could feel moral outrage. Gross.

The person who’d taken it upon themselves to talk to her had two black-tipped fingers on their hand. They were doing some fiddly work fixing the ships; something that mittens only got in the way for.

“Still,” they said. “Thank you for—”

“Stop *thanking* me,” Jun snapped. “I’ve done literally nothing for you.”

Apparently these people *loved* a humble noble. The next person who looked at her like her lackluster attempts at humanitarianism were *endearing,* she was going to punt straight over the camp wall and into the ocean. At which point they’d probably thank her for their freedom. *Incredibly* gross.

The ex-prince's crew continued smirking.

"Your governor finally deigned to write back," the Chief guy said, as she stood before their council once again. They didn't even offer refreshments. Stingy clients were the same everywhere.

Apparently the prince's sister was being sent. That "coming to negotiate in person" sounded vaguely ominous to Jun, but these guys were debating whether it was some kind of slight, that the Fire Nation was sending a woman.

A teenage girl, if Jun's memory served, but she wasn't about to correct them.

"Wasn't she Fire Lord?" one of the councilors asked.

"I believe the entire royal family has been Fire Lord," said Arnook, looking like a man who was nursing a headache.

"Does she even have the authority?" another said.

"To speak for the colonies?" Jun interrupted. "She does. More so than the Fire Lord in Caldera, at the moment."

Because the last Jun had seen, the colonies were all for their double teenage Fire Lords. Good thing they'd gone in for redundancy, given what had happened to their prince. Hopefully the siblings hadn't been close.

"If I might suggest," Jun interrupted again, while they were debating the girl's actual title and how good any deal with her and the colonies might be, given the very obvious civil war writing on the wall. "It's traditional to offer a host gift." It was absolutely not. "A sign of

goodwill. Which will, of course, be reciprocated in better starting terms once negotiations begin. Might I suggest releasing all the female prisoners when she arrives? It will be a powerful show of your trading power, and free up supplies and guards to focus on the male prisoners. Who are, of course, doing most of the heavy lifting."

Most importantly: Jun was a singularly important subset of "women."

"And it would set you free, without any bargaining at all," the Chief guy said, catching on real fast.

"And place me in a better position to act as liaison to your interests. Or do you think this Fire Lord turned princess is going to trust the word of someone still held prisoner? You could be making me say anything."

"You told us these prisoners were useless," Arnook said. "That you're the only real bargaining chip we have."

Some idiot waterbending guard had let their only real bargaining chip get eaten by a shark.

"I've seen how you feed us," Jun said. "We're only going to drain your resources more, as it gets colder. You don't have enough to keep us all. And you should know from your own records that most of these women are lower ranked." Not that she'd taken a head count. But she'd never heard of a female general, so she was pretty sure sexism in the Fire Nation took the form of *The draft is for everyone, but promotions are for men.* "Do you want a good start to these negotiations? Do you want all the supplies and contracts you're going to ask for? Or do you want frozen bodies? Make the women into their problem. Make me into an asset."

"We'll discuss it," Chiefy said.

Jun didn't delude herself into calling that one a *maybe.*

Still. When she got back to camp, when people started *looking* at her again, she held her chin high.

“Azula herself is coming for us. No one is allowed to die until then. Understand?”

Some of them actually *smiled,* the idiots.

“Yes, Lady Jun,” they said, like they were returning a fondness, instead of following the only order she could give.

(The northern council was right: Azula was coming for exactly one of their prisoners.

It was extremely fortunate that no letters had been sent concerning a certain idiot’s death, or she would have been coming for all of them.

The targets of this pronoun are left as an exercise for the reader.)

Certain someones who wished the prisoners fed—not to name mask buddy names—could not just *give* them food. Food wasn’t sitting around in warehouses to be shipped elsewhere, like it was in the Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation, who’d spent a hundred years feeding their front lines. The Northern capital certainly stockpiled more food than any Water Tribe village Katar—a certain someone had heard of, but it wasn’t like stocking up ahead of winter was an unfamiliar concept. Anything stolen from the city could mean families going hungry.

But if the food just happened to swim its way into camp... that wasn’t stealing from the community. That was *contributing.*

So it wasn't so much a heist, in the end. Unless one counted the (temporary) theft of a shark.

The Greenland leopard seal shark waited just off the coast, most of its bulk hidden under an ice shelf, with only its nose above the surface. Penguin-sheep *baaed* in the waters all around. The herd had to return to land sometime, and it was camped directly under their favorite slope. It took in a breath through its nose, and blew bubbles out of its gills. It waited. And waited.

And noticed, immediately, as the ocean went *strange.* Water no longer flowed over its skin, but halted entirely, like it was in a bubble of perfect stillness.

The bubble stayed. The stillness didn't. It was accelerated forward—

Which was even more alarming for the penguin-sheep it was being accelerated *towards.* Particularly as the water itself seemed to be pulling them straight back towards it.

The shark did not think in a way recognizable to humans. Nonetheless, when life gives you penguin-sheep...

The shark stopped struggling against the bubble, and opened its mouth.

Ice *cracked,* and a new tunnel under the camp opened.

Outside the igloo of one Lady Jun, the guards were jumping at shadows even more loudly than usual.

Jun needed another pillow. One to shove over her head. The pillow currently under her head was a rolled up spare shirt, and it was staying right there between the cold ground and her beauty sleep.

“Do they ever shut up?” she groaned.

“Do you?” grumbled back her attendant.

“SHARK,” someone screamed.

“TEETH,” screamed another.

“HEL—”

The shouting stopped again.

Baaing replaced it.

...The baaing also stopped.

“If it bleeds shirts again, don’t wake me up,” Jun said.

“If it bleeds shirts again, I’m suffocating you with them,” replied Engineer Hanako.

“Make sure to use the ones in my size. Your size would take forever.”

Engineer Hanako was already awake. No time like the present to sharpen more shivs.

When the morning shift came, they found the evening shift pinned to various surfaces. Again. The hole that had claimed two of their prisoners was open. Again. And gaping wider than ever.

No human footprints appeared around it; only bloody drag lines, over the impressions of something very large, and very old.

Spikes ringed the hole, like teeth in an open maw. On each was neatly skewered a dead penguin-sheep.

A very full shark slept contentedly off the coast, blowing the occasional bubble from its gills.

“...Are those for us?”

“Of course they are. He’s our ghost.”

“Is it ghosts, now?”

The penguin-sheep had obviously been left for the prisoners. Like the clothes.

The guards did not find this obvious.

“Get a sledge,” one of them said. And then they ordered the prisoners to start taking down and loading the carcasses, which was fine.

And then they started to pull them out of the camp, which was not.

“Those are ours,” one of the prisoners said.

It still might have ended there, except that the ice *creaked* under the sledge, and the prisoner dragging it tried to leap away, and one of the day guards shoved them *back.* Another guard was already bending the ice thicker, but that just led to *more* creaking.

“We’ve already lost two here,” someone muttered. “Do they want us all dead?”

And the guard who’d shoved the prisoner back. That guard heard them, and *snorted.*

Which was about the time the riot started. People forgot about that creaky ice and surged forwards, shoving at guards, who shoved back with hands, then fists, then waterbending, and any second now someone was going to break out their *firebending.* Jun reached down the back of Hanako’s pants and grabbed herself a shiv, hiding it up her own sleeve and keeping her back to the shorter woman’s, but this was one of those rare times that stabbing someone wouldn’t improve her life. If this kept up, people were going to die and it wouldn’t even help her.

And there went the firebending, some kind of out-of-practice fireball, and that guard was levitating one of the *giant ice teeth—*

“Stop,” Jun said, shoving the idiot firebender out of the way. Back into the crowd of prisoners, hopefully to be forgotten. As for the guard: she faced him, arms outstretched.

“Your Chief is in the middle of negotiations with the Fire Princess. Who is on her way here. How is it going to look, if your prisoners are freshly beaten when she gets here? If your noble liaison is impaled?” That was her. She was the noble liaison. Currently un-impaled, and liking it, but if this guy thought he was scarier than half the people she’d beaten to bounties, she still had a shiv up her sleeve with his name on it.

One of the head guards pulled the idiot with the icicle away.

It didn’t fix anything. They still had to watch the guards drag all that food away; all they’d won was the right not to be forced to do it themselves. And all these other idiots had tipped their collective hand; shown that they weren’t good little broken-spirited prisoners. That when it came down to it, they were going to fight.

Jun felt cold even under her third coat.

She had no idea how long it would take that princess to get here. Didn’t know if the girl would turn right back around, when they couldn’t produce her brother. She had even less idea how many prisoners would still be here, when the girl arrived. The North knew—thought they knew—that everyone here was expendable. Except for Jun. And with the ships nearly done, *expendable* was going to be even more contagious than the cough going around.

Lady Jun was protected by her position.

Her non-existent position. Which was going to get revealed as soon as the princess arrived, seeing as she didn’t have a prince on hand to placate her with.

“I’ve got to get us out of here, don’t I?” Jun asked.

She certainly didn’t see anyone else doing it.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko: If I had a Fire Nation nickle for every time I was involved in a simultaneous prison break, I would have one nickle. One. Nickle.

Chapter 50: Oops, All Breakouts

Jun watched as the waterbenders eased the steel hull down into the water. The ship bobbed, settled; floated steadily, in its hole in the camp's ice, as the guards prodded prisoners down below its decks to check on every seam.

The ships were almost done. So was the usefulness of most of the idiots around her. If she wanted these schmucks to sail her out of here, she'd better get them at it while there were enough left alive.

"If we're getting out of here, we need to think this through," she said, later that night, to an ice ceiling that didn't care and an attendant who was face-first in her furs.

"Do we?" groaned Engineer Hanako, who'd spent most of the day patch-welding leaks while cold water sprayed her in the face.

"Who else is going to?" This was a painfully honest question.

Less painful to Hanako, to whom it was rhetorical.

"Ugh, point," the engineer conceded. Because "sixteen" wasn't generally synonymous with "thinking things through." The prince's bodyguard was right: whatever Zuko's plan was, it was going to need Zuko-proofing. Hanako was *not* taking the turtle seal tunnels out of here.

No one from the healer's ward had been invited to the first float testing of the ships. But some of their husbands and brothers and sons had.

The ships were almost done. They had as many people as they were getting.

“How are we going to do this?” Katara asked.

Her mask buddy drew in a breath.

“*Don’t* say turtle seal tunnels,” she said.

This caused a significant delay in his reply.

Jun knew how to survive. The basics on the road, just her and her shirshu, were still solid here. The steps of this dance weren’t any different; she just... had to scale up.

They’d need water. Food. Shelter, which stealing a ship would already get them, so there was that. But first they needed to *get* the ship.

Fine. Whatever. She wasn’t exactly the Blue Spirit, but she’d gotten her fair share of targets out of places that didn’t always want to give them up.

Get the guards out of the way. Get the ship out to the ocean. Get clear. Get paid.

Ugh, she was getting paid in *gratitude,* wasn’t she?

“We can distill water,” her mask buddy was saying, “but it’s not efficient. We have to eat more to use our flames that long, which would mean going through our food too fast--”

“Leave the water to us,” Chagluak said. “Bending impurities from water is one of the first things our girls learn. Can’t clean a wound if you can’t clean *water*. But you’re right; food’s going to be a problem.”

“We can steal nets on our way out,” Apayauq said, “but we can’t have those dragging while we’re still being chased. The first few days, at least, we’re going to be living on whatever we bring.”

“Do you think we can trick them into loading extra food?” another woman asked.

“Trick?” asked Yagoda. “I would think it only prudent. Won’t their women worry, if the men take this unfamiliar ship out, without enough supplies in case things go wrong?”

The grins of women shared many similarities with those of shark-seals, if one considered them threats enough to look.

Jun watched her fellow prisoners loading bin after bin of salvaged coal onto the test ship.

If only food would be so easily--

The guards brought in pallets of food next. They loaded. And kept loading.

...The world owed her this one. Jun would thank it if and when this worked.

“They’re not going to leave that ship alone, once it’s stocked,” Sanna said. “How are we getting the guards out of the way? I’m not killing anyone,” she added, to be clear.

“We outnumber them,” Hanako said. Because no one had ever accused her of being adverse to a little murder, particularly none of the officers in her chain of command leading up to her posting on the *Wanyi.*

“You’ve outnumbered them this entire time. How’s that been going for you?” Jun asked, tossing another shiv at the spot on the wall she’d decided was her target. It hit hilt-first, and clattered onto the pile below. “These things aren’t balanced worth shit, by the way.”

“So sorry they aren’t up to your ladyship’s standards,” Hanako said. “Might I suggest a better place to stick them?”

“We know their shift changes,” Jun continued, tugging over the blanket containing her shiv pile, because only idiots left their nice warm furs to get things. She threw the blanket back to its spot once she’d retrieved them. It was about as aerodynamic as the shivs had been. “And we know who we’re dealing with. Especially with the night watch. If we can get someone to replace the spooky guy, get them jumping at shadows, maybe even instigate a little ghost action ourselves, then we’d stand a better chance at taking them down than these tetanus hazards would at hitting the damn target.”

“You weren’t complaining when you took them from my *pants.”*

“I had a cramp from reaching so far down.”

“I will kill you.”

“But do we kill them?” Jun asked, nearly making the mistake of tossing up a shiv just to catch it. She threw it at the wall, instead; it hit side-first. Not the flat part of the side. Yeah,

she was not trusting these with her fingers.

“How is that even a question?” asked Hanako.

Jun’d had a rule, in bounty hunting: no matter what the poster requested, she’d taken her bounties alive whenever they weren’t too stupid to live. Then clients couldn’t pull the ol’ *that decaying head could be anyone’s* trick. And no one was even paying her for dealing with the Water Tribe, which continued to be offensive on a deeply professional level. She wasn’t going to put effort into killing anyone she didn’t have to, and she certainly wasn’t going to do it for *free.*

Now how to translate that from bounty hunter to noble-ese. And to give more speeches, in hissed whispers over meals, after grabbing people by their coat scruffs on the way between jobs. The smuggler crews were easy enough to convince; they were used to body trails being bad for business. It was the soldiers she had to pull her Fire Nation Noble voice with.

“You came here to kill them. They didn’t kill you. How about we minimize the murder on the way out, in case they catch us again?”

She took their grudging grumbles for agreement, just like a real noble would.

“This isn’t what the men practice,” one of the women panted, after she’d gotten her breath back, after Zuko had flipped her over his shoulder. She kept laying on the ground, like she was safe to talk back to him from here, like her instructors had never hit her while she was down before. Or like she trusted him not to.

“Your men are practicing to attack. To kill,” Zuko said. “What you’re learning is harder.”

She wiped a strand of sweaty hair from her face. Pushed herself back up. “Always is, isn’t it.”

And she took her stance again. Zuko nodded.

Katara watched, as her mask buddy walked Sanna through the moves again. This time, it was his back hitting the ground.

She smiled, and turned back to her own half of their practice.

Zuko couldn't decide whether it was better or worse, keeping his back turned on where Katara was teaching them to freeze men into ice blocks.

"...Don't forget their hands," he said.

Or their mouths, he didn't say, because he didn't think the breath of fire would be helping any waterbenders escape.

"Stealth training and silent captures next," he announced to their entire class, so he could go hide in the shadows for awhile.

"Yes," said Apayauq, who was getting very quick with the good rope.

Which still left the problem of getting the ships *out.*

“Gee,” said Hanako, tossing and catching her newest shiv, “maybe we’ll have some friendly waterbenders on our side.”

“What a fantastic plan,” Jun grit out, watching the blade. “Now if that *doesn’t* happen...”

“Fair,” Hanako grudgingly allowed, like *friendly waterbenders* were a previously undiscussed assumption.

“Can your lot weaken the ice, without all the guards noticing? Enough that we can actually use those ice breakers once we get the engines running?”

“We’ll see what we can do,” said Hanako, who’d helped weaken the ice enough to ~~drown~~ rescue one prince and one too-cheerful crewmate, and was game to try for an entire ship next.

“I know we can get the ships out,” Zuko said. They certainly had enough waterbenders on their side, and Katara had been drilling them on shifting ice slabs even more than she’d been drilling them in combat; if they could pull off the one, they’d have the rest of their lives to learn the other. “But I’m still not sure how we’re getting clear.”

“It’s going to be hard,” Katara agreed.

“At least the Ocean won’t be personally trying to sink ships, this time.”

Somewhere sideways of both mortality and morality, the Ocean quivered a blobby quiver.

Yue booped him a blobby boop.

“When are we doing this?” Hanako asked.

She asked it like Jun should already know, so she answered like she did. “The night before the test voyage. When else?”

After that, the ships would start being moved to wherever the Water Tribe kept their actual working fleet, not propped up on ice blocks right next to their prisoners.

After that, who knew how many prisoners they’d even need, outside of the engineers.

The night before the voyage was their best shot.

Katara and Zuko had also run that math. And warned Lieutenant Jee, who would disseminate it on to the others in the know.

(Lieutenant Jee had not passed this information on to Engineer Hanako. Why would he? She lived with the prince’s bodyguard.)

“We’ll need a distraction,” Hanako said.

“We’ll need a feast,” one of the women grinned.

“I’ll break out the strong brews,” another said.

“I’ll break out the drugs,” said Healer Yagoda. She grinned a wizened grin at the collective gasping. “I was young once, dears. Who do you think wrote those dosage guides?”

(Kanna, lately known as Gran-Gran, had also been young once. Whether she remembered the entirety of her youth was between her, her good friend Yagoda, and certain species of kelp known to cause turtle seals to repeatedly slide down the steps of the palace, pupils fully dilated, arfing all the while. It had looked like fun.

Nature was a wonderful teacher. And also, sometimes, a reliable dealer of cannabis kelp.)

“Have you seen this plant, in the tunnels?” Katara asked her mask buddy.

“Don’t eat it,” he told her, which was absolutely a yes. And also a yes, as to whether he could get them a great quantity on short notice.

And so the women of the Northern Water Tribe, or a certain subset of them, began pushing for a feast to celebrate their new fleet. On the night of the full moon, of course, for the strongest blessings; and if that happened to place the feast the night *before* the test voyage, rather than after the ship's safe return, well. Wouldn't that be worth it, so that Yue herself could attend?

...Arnook did not push back on the date very much. And arranged for a particularly clear section of ice to be installed in the roof of the dining hall, where moonlight could grace a seat that had been standing empty at the head table.

"What if someone attacks while they're drugged?" Sirka asked. "The Fire Nation must still hate us, and the Earth Kingdom keeps pushing back against our closed harbors, and that princess is coming with who knows how many soldiers--"

"What are the odds she'll come the same night?" Apayauq countered.

(Zuko, who knew better than to underestimate Azula out loud, declined to join this conversation.)

"I'm just worried," Sirka said. "The last time..."

The last time they'd nearly lost the city. Had lost their own princess. The salvaged fleet they'd gained was cold recompense.

"It will be okay," Katara said.

This did not actually address Sirka's concern. *"It will be okay,"* as a concept, rarely did.

The night of the full moon, the night of the feast, the night before the (scheduled) first voyage arrived.

“There’s something I need to tell you.” Zuko said, as they sat on their roof one last time. “After.”

“Okay,” Katara said, but what she meant was *I trust you.*

“Thank you,” he said, but what he meant wasn’t so easily put into words.

Overhead, the aurora flared, even more intensely than he’d ever seen before. He tilted back his head. Fought down the urge to take off his mask, then and there, to see it better.

And maybe for other reasons.

“It’s so pretty,” he said, because the sight was another thing too hard to put into words.

“Pretty” was Agni’s warning re: drowning entire fleets. Or even single ships. A few days late, but right on time.

Yue patted a sulking saltwater blob, and peered through her newly installed peephole into the evening’s festivities. She wondered whose idea it had been, and who was going to sit on that empty seat next to her father.

The kitchen was the warmest place in the north pole, tonight.

Sirka's hand shook as she stirred one of the stews. Katara set her hand on the other woman's, until she took in a breath, until she was able to return Katara's smile, however weakly.

Dinner was nearly ready. The first course would go out soon. Not everyone was in on the plan, but enough of them were.

"It will be okay," she repeated, like it would change anything.

"Why," said Jun, "the fuck," emphasized Jun, "are there so many of them."

There were extra guards on the camp. Way too many. It went past night-before-a-big-event caution, past niggling suspicion, straight to confirmed threat.

And they were locking the camp down, cutting the workday short, by hours.

"Lady Jun," the shift leader said, "the chief has invited you to dinner."

Well fuck her.

"Come, attendant," Jun said.

"Just you," said the guard.

Hanako grabbed her hands, her face the perfect picture of servantly worry; Jun accepted the shivs now in her palms, and scooted them straight on up the sleeves of her coat, with noble

grace.

She could tell, just by the feel, that Hanako had given her the *good* shiv.

Katara's seat was at the head table, just as it had been on the night she'd first come to the north all those months ago. Literally just as it had been: she was even in the same seat. Not right next to Chief Arnook, but not far off.

The first of the food platters were coming out, but most of the guests were still too caught up in conversations, or in the demonstrations just beginning, to eat.

That Fire Nation noble lady was here, seated on the other side of the chief. She wore the same clothes as last time. Maybe with a bit more padding, from having an extra layer or two underneath, but that same dragon-embroidered silk coat still set her apart. Its edges were just a little more frayed, from daily wear. Her hair was greasier, but done up in an impeccable bun, with that skull ornament worn atop it like armor. The woman's hands were tucked into her sleeves; she wasn't reaching for the food.

Katara, of course, was so captivated watching the bending on display, with talking to those around her, that she barely touched hers, either.

Neither did the chief.

Neither did any of his bending masters, their water already at the ready, as they finished their display. Or his warriors, getting ready for theirs.

Katara met Arnook's eyes, and knew.

“Did you think it would work?” He asked her, over the empty space where only moonlight had come to sit. “Did you think you knew my people so well, that you could steal them from me? You aren’t of *our* Water Tribe.”

Sirka was half pulled, half led from the kitchen, two warriors flanking her. Her hands were still shaking.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But we couldn’t just leave them all defenseless, not like— It only took a night. For them to break the walls, march in our streets, kill our bending, our—”

“Not to interrupt,” the Fire Nation noble interrupted, eyes on Katara. “But were you getting out of here? Because this is going to be awkward, if you weren’t.”

She had one arm wrapped over Chief Arnook’s chest. Her other hand, with accompanying shiv, was at his throat.

“I was just leaving,” Katara said.

The other woman looked Katara up and down, her teeth somewhere between a smile and a threat. “You wouldn’t happen to be a friendly waterbender, would you?”

Katara grinned back.

The moon continued to shine. As in life, Chief Arnook did not think what message his daughter might be trying to convey, with her constant presence at his side. Also as in life, he did not think much of her at all.

Jun still had Chiefy under control. He’d struggled, tried to throw her off when she’d prodded him into standing, but apparently he’d never met a woman with biceps before. Or at least, not

one willing to use them against him.

Unfortunately, the other guys in the room had grabbed some of the other women. Counter-hostages would have been more useful if Jun either knew or cared about any of them, but her friendly waterbender seemed outraged over it, and Jun was taking her cues from that girl at least until they were out of this palace.

“She doesn’t even have anything to do with this,” the woman who’d apparently been some kind of drama-traitor was shouting. “Neither does Siaja, or Alornerk!”

So the menfolk knew about as much about who was in on this—whatever *this* was—as Jun did. Good to know. And they were just grabbing random women to use as hostages over it. Also good to know.

No one else had gotten out weapons, yet, but it wasn’t hard to see which way things were going.

“You’d turn on your own people?” traitor woman accused.

Chiefy didn’t answer her, for reasons of shiv-to-the-throat.

“Listen,” Jun said, “not to kill the social revelations, or whatever you’ve all got going on. But are we escaping?”

Aaand no one even heard her, because everybody was shouting at everybody, because apparently not all the *men* were in on things, either, and those were their sisters and mothers and a particularly spunky grandma, there.

“That’s my *wife,”* one guy shouted.

“That’s your *chief,”* some other guy shouted.

“Oi,” Jun said. “Avatar’s friend. Are you making an opening, or am I?”

“I’ll do it,” the girl said.

And *woosh* went all the water in their fancy indoor pools, and also half their ceiling, which was why Jun didn’t take bounties on benders unless the hazard pay was good enough. A few scattered people were still on their feet, the ones that had bent up their own little ice shields, but most of the dinning hall was just. Out the doors.

And coming back in, flicking the water from their clothes and those of their very angry friends, as they marched under the palace’s new open air ceiling. The torches still lighting the room had nothing on the moonlight staring down on them all. Ugh, it was even reflecting off her shiv; no matter how she angled the thing, the moon kept managing to glare directly into Jun’s eyes.

Zuko first realized something was wrong when a wave washed half the party goers out into the canal.

He closed his eyes, briefly. Then he ran the opposite way—towards the healing ward, to the women still waiting.

To the men trying to arrest them, who weren’t expecting a firebender. His flames could pass for a precocious toddler’s, now.

...After that showing, the men weren’t expecting him to *actually* be good with swords.

He re-sheathed them, as the women finished dragging the last of the groaning bodies inside. Apayauq rather eagerly set to work, applying her new rope skills.

“We’re going early?” Sanna asked.

“You are,” he answered. “Make sure to get the people from Katara’s ship, too.”

She nodded, stiffly.

“Let them go,” the waterbender said, her own glare on the only men she hadn’t literally swept aside: the ones hiding behind women.

“Let our Chief go,” one of them said back.

The girl looked to Jun. Jun tried to give her best *are you serious* look back, but the moonlight was *still* jabbing her retinas, so it looked more like a grimace instead. She took the shiv off his throat—*finally,* that got the moon out of her eyes—and gave him a shove forwards, raising her hands at the same time. Not all the way into the air; not a surrender, just a *this is on you.*

“Let them go,” Katara repeated.

The men didn’t.

The real fight started not with a wave of water, but with one man punching another for manhandling his mother.

And then it was the kind of brawl with no clear sides. Not men versus women, so much as the guys who’d laid hands on women versus the ones who’d taken offense to that, with a dash of women who’d had enough of tonight tossed in. Chiefy was shouting something, but Chiefy

should have given better orders long before this little party got started. Katara was bend-shoving her way through the crowd; Jun stuck to her, as the girl gathered up the people who were hers. At least someone had an idea of who was on what side, here.

They made it most of the way out before Arnook got his own guys gathered up. Someone bent an ice wall over the hole Katara had opened up; one of the women with them slashed her hands, and a much smaller hole reopened. But by then a few men were in their way, and Jun was really missing her whip, which had always been excellent for crowd control. She was missing anything with a longer range than Engineer Hanako's best piece of metal, actually. Besides the waterbending, though, most people hadn't broken out more than fists.

...So of course, one of the guys blocking the door whipped up an *ice spear.*

"Move," Katara said, and Jun didn't know what she was doing with her hands, but it looked threatening.

Spear guy did not move. Neither did his friends, who'd taken his cue. One of them had pulled a knife, one of them had a club, and the crazy guy jumping down through the doorway with a mask had *two swords—*

Katara gasped. And surged forward. And between her and crazy mask guy, they had the others on the floor in seconds.

"You were supposed to help the women if something went wrong," Katara chided.

"I did," a particularly distinctive voice said, with much affront. "Then I came back."

Unlike Katara, it was a voice Jun fully expected to hear up here. She just hadn't expected to hear it *again.*

Prince Zuko was alive. And still in the north. Which meant everything she'd done for the past few days was *useless,* because her bargaining chip was standing right here.

(Maybe if she'd wanted to ride his coat tails out of here, she shouldn't have stolen his coat.)

Jun wished she'd figured out which of the jugs on the table had been northern booze. At least she could have blamed drunk Jun in the morning.

After that, she was done with dramatics. The kids weren't. She ran after them, good shiv in hand, as Katara made ice slides down levels of the city and over canals, as the prince parkoured grown men into unconsciousness, as people stared out windows at them passing and all Jun could do was give them a dead-eyed stare back. And occasionally grab the arm of one of the women running with them, when someone tripped or fell behind. She wanted as many of these waterbenders as she could get.

They reached the city wall. A surge of snow brought them to the top; another spirits-cursed ramp was their way down, towards the open ground and the prison camp below. Jun stood at its top for a moment. Just a moment. Just long enough to appreciate that the unnecessary drama of this escape could be summarized in one word: teenagers.

She took the spirits-cursed ice slide.

Yes, it was fun.

Jun resented it immensely.

Katara didn't find her slide fun. Katara found it slow, found it nearly endless, didn't know what she'd find when they got to the end.

(Didn't notice the way the men chasing them had been losing ground. Didn't notice how their own ice ramp, when they tried to make one, shattered into a thousand glittering crystals

before they could step foot on it, like it was no more substantial than moonlight.)

(Yue could still be a teenager, too.)

What they found, at the end, was the other women waiting for them. And taking turns peering through a hole someone had bent in the ice wall, into a prison where the prisoners were already knocking together heads.

Jun finished her own turn peeking, and stood up straight. Slid her good shiv sideways into her hair, just below her silver skull, like another ornament.

“Are you opening those gates, or what?” she demanded, hands on her hips.

She was grinning, when Katara bent them open. Her people caught sight of her, and grinned back.

“Found some friendly waterbenders,” she said, and the people cheered for Lady Jun.

...Zuko had never had people cheer for *him* after a prison breakout.

“Huh,” one of the women said, as they bent a clear path for their ship. “I thought this would be harder.”

It would have been, without days of firebender feet rotting the ice.

Smoke was already rising from the ship's stack, as somewhere inside, Engineer Hanako assumed command of her domain. Coal was shoveled, fires lit, boilers pre-heated with all the speed determined firebenders could bring to bear. The first gears began to turn.

The plan, if they'd had a whole evening with Arnook's court drugged senseless, had been to consolidate the coal stores onto one ship. To slag the other ships' engines, to hole their hulls, to give them back to the Ocean.

With all the men Arnook could rally bearing down on them, they made due with a mere *full speed ahead.*

Their ship picked up speed, as it chugged through a canal opposite elements had opened together. Went fast, and faster, as waterbenders worked the currents and firebenders the engines.

The camp's wall crumbled under several tons of very motivated steel. As did the thin ice shelf beyond.

Ahead lay open ocean, their path lit by moonlight.

Arnook's men watched them go. They found their bending far more cooperative as they aimed for the harbor than it had been when they'd tried to get down to the camp. The women had done something to them, clearly.

Yue still considered herself a woman, so this was technically true.

She allowed them their bending in full again, as they reached their own ships. It was too exciting a chase not to. And if she lent a little extra power to the bending of her favorites on

Katara's ship, well, it was only a fair counter to the nudging currents the Ocean was providing to its favorites.

The Ocean blorbled in concentric rings of excitement. Tui had never *raced boats* with it before.

Their ship was free, the moon was full, and Master Katara of the soon-to-be-expanded Southern Water Tribe was only feeling *more* energized as this went on.

"Iceberg," one of the former prisoners called, from the lookout. And, a moment later, "Ice *field."*

And her mask buddy started giving orders, and Helmsman Kyo—propped up on a stool, his broken leg in front of him—listened to him, like for some reason a teenager was the one with the most authority here.

And maybe Katara would have paid a little more attention to that, if the moonlight wasn't singing in her blood.

"Hold course," she countermanded.

"We'll hit them," her mask buddy said.

"We won't," she said, and watched the distance close.

The North hadn't just been repairing the ships; they'd been refitting them, for a waterbending crew. For a waterbending crew at *war.* Which was a terrible thing, but.

But Katara had been daydreaming how to bend with them since the moment she'd seen them.

"Lower the fins," she ordered.

"Lowered," an older man with sideburns confirmed, a moment later.

She stood on the little deck in front of the wheelhouse, the wind on her skin and the waves in her blood, and *pushed.*

And an entire imperial class Fire Nation cruiser spun on a Ba Sing Se dime, and changed course from southwest to southeast in the time it had taken baby Katara to spin a leaf boat in a spring melt stream.

"Raise them," she ordered, and the drag they'd provided disappeared.

Arnook's ships scrambled to follow. Sails were shifted and local currents re-directed with a speed that startled even the men bending them.

They were gaining on the cruiser again.

"They're changing the currents," Katara said. "Everyone, like we practiced; it's not about strength, it's about working together. We can do this." And she started calling the moves to build a surface current in their favor, as their pursuers drew closer,

and closer,

their own currents skimming them along.

There were no convenient icebergs to dodge around, no use for maneuverability over speed when there was a line of ships behind them, a V of teeth closing in from east and west. The only clear way was ahead.

The men were just behind. Close enough to attack, now. But their crews were too busy putting in the final push to catch up, and Katara... Katara could have tried sending ice through their hulls. But it would have meant taking her own bending away from what all the other women were doing, from what they were building up together.

Chagluak opened her mouth, and started to sing. It wasn't a song Katara had grown up with. But she'd heard it around the city, where groups of women worked. It was just as good for setting the rhythm on their bending as it had been for hauling nets up from the piers, or beating the dirt from blankets. Another woman took it up, and then another, until Katara had heard enough that she could join in, too.

The current under them was swelling, gaining strength, but not fast enough—

Their pursuers were nearly on them—

Which was when the Greenland seal shark surfaced in their wake, rather grumpy from a near-miss with this new-fangled "propeller" technology. The huge old creature bark-roared its complaints before turning to go. Its sightless eyes, dangling with the glowing parasites that had blinded it, seemed to stare directly at the oncoming Northern ships.

More than one crew lost their own rhythm completely.

"Whoa," Helmsman Kyo said, "that was spooky."

The cutter had reached its full speed. Below deck, their firebenders were making sure it stayed that way. Their waterbenders were singing the path ahead. The men behind them were disorganized, and going to tire a lot sooner than a coal-powered engine. It was as good of a head start as they could have asked for.

Colony waters and the Fire Nation's navy were only a few days south of here. Katara had never thought of "Fire Nation navy" as a synonym for "safety," but things had gone weird the day an iceberg started glowing and hadn't stopped with the end of the war.

They'd made it.

Which was, of course, when a dark shape rounded the ice pack ahead.

"Ship," the lookout called. And, a moment later: *"Fleet."*

In the lead was an imperial class cutter, much like their own.

"That thing I had to tell you," her mask buddy said, suddenly.

("...Nope," said Jun, to no one in particular. She pushed away from the panel she'd been leaning on, and away from whatever conversation this was going to be.)

"I think we have bigger problems," said Katara.

Metaphorically, yes. Literally, the ship was exactly of a height with theirs, and the girl standing across from them at her own rail, the moon-glittered sea between them, slightly shorter.

"Brother," she said, and somehow managed to make her completely flat tone carry over the space between.

"I can explain," said Zuko, lowering his mask.

“Can you,” said Katara.

So at least he had options, when it came to his upcoming death.

Chapter 51: Crowned Prince

Chapter Notes

Trivia: peacock chicks can fly relatively soon after hatching. I have it on good authority that "It's very obnoxious!"

This preemptive Children's Fun Fact Science Corner is brought to you by: No Reason In Particular®.

little eggie wiggles

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-*Weeks ago*-

They'd found traces on the beach, however late. The impressions of feet in sand; more than one set, less than four. The discarded cloth a certain servant had packed his rice balls in. His shoes, neatly set above the tide line and apparently voluntarily discarded, because spirits forbid her brother be kidnapped with a little dignity.

"I know a good bounty hunter," Governor Shohei had offered. "She may still be in town."

The bounty hunter had not, in fact, still been in town.

The bounty hunter had left in some hurry the night prior.

"…Ah," the governor had said.

-*Now*-

“Brother,” Azula said, and was pleased to witness his entire frame lock up, even with the gulf of their ships between them.

It was good to be remembered.

Katara wouldn’t board Azula’s ship for explanations.

His sister laughed across the distance at the idea of boarding theirs.

Zuko did not think he would feel particularly safe on either ship.

“Brother,” Azula said. “So help me if you take yourself hostage again.”

…If he left this one, he wasn’t sure what she’d do to a ship that had been so impertinently carrying him.

His sister’s hands were gripping the rails. Maybe it was just the moonlight, making them seem so white. But.

But he trusted her. It had been a decision, and he’d made it.

(He’d promised he wasn’t leaving. He hadn’t meant to break it, but “hadn’t meant to” had never meant much in their family.)

(Except that she’d come for him, like intentions mattered. Like she trusted him, too.)

“I’m coming over,” he called.

“I thought you were going to explain,” Katara said, her arms crossed. “Or was that a lie, too?”

“I didn’t— I *can.* Maybe. But I don’t think we have time, right now. Azula isn’t—”

“Brother. You are trying my patience.”

“—Patient,” he finished, lamely.

“Why should I let you go back? So you can start another civil war?”

“I. Don’t think that’s how civil wars work.”

“You’d be the expert.”

“Please watch my people while I’m gone,” he said.

That was trust, too. He didn’t remember when he’d made that decision.

He was still holding his black mask with its lone white dot. He offered it back to her; it belonged to the Water Tribe, anyway.

She took it. “…Are you going to be okay?”

She might come with, if he asked. They were still mask buddies.

Are you going to be okay, she'd asked, like the future of his nation hadn't just caught up with him.

"As long as no one tries to kill me," he said, "then probably. …Uh. Could you give me a ride over?"

To Azula's ship. In her fleet. How did she even get a fleet?

-*Somewhat less than weeks ago*-

"Please," said Admiral Arata of the Central Fire Navy Fleet (formerly the Southern, but southern maneuvers had become unfashionable in the current court). There was not a single shred of amusement to be found between his trailing moustache and his tea cup. "Please, do not go visiting sick relatives on me now."

Admiral Masuko, formerly a lieutenant of the Northern fleet, now its ranking survivor, slurped his own tea with culturally appropriate levels of obnoxiousness.

They had found a little used balcony for their mid-meeting tea break. Their little balcony overlooked the hawkery. The hawkery in which the Avatar and his remaining Water Tribe ambassador were checking, again, for messages.

"There have been a lot of storms by the Sun Warrior's island lately," the Avatar said. "If Appa can't get through, maybe their snowy owl hawks haven't been able to, either?"

"Or maybe," the Water Tribe boy said, "the North saw a free political hostage."

"Not a word," Admiral Arata said.

“Perhaps,” said Admiral Masuko, which very much qualified as a word, “His Majesty will reconsider his stance on enforcing our northern border, now that the Avatar’s own waterbender has been waylaid.”

Along with an entire navy crew and the largely Fire Nation prisoners they were transporting, neither man said. (Including a ranking navy officer who’d retired in good standing, neither was privy to.)

The Fire Nation Navy’s decline hadn’t begun with the promotion of a singularly unfit man to admiral, nor with the scrapping of a sizable portion of their combined fleets at the northern seige. It had begun when Fire Lord Ozai had been handed some mechanic’s designs for flying ships.

The man never had taken good care of his toys, new or old.

Perhaps they’d have to invite the Admiral of the Aerial Fleet to the next one of these little tea breaks. Whenever someone with enough rank was found lively enough for the promotion. If their new Fire Lord even cared to appoint one.

Down below, the young Avatar was rocking on his heels. “ ‘Hostage’ is a pretty strong word.”

“Sorry,” the Water Tribe boy self-corrected. “I meant my sister is their honored political guest.”

Admiral Arata snorted under his moustache. Raised his cup. Nearly dropped it.

There was a girl on their tea balcony. A teenager, dressed largely in black. Neither veteran had seen her approach. She was leaning in the shadows by the doorway, where niether those in the hall nor those below could see her.

“The Northern Water Tribe has your prince,” she said, in a rather singular monotone. “Are you coming?”

This was Governor Ukano’s daughter; a favorite of both Ozai’s children.

After the abuse and neglect of Fire Lord Ozai, under the benevolent de-prioritization of Fire Lord Iroh, both admirals remembered a boy who’d shouted at the war council on behalf of their lost fleet.

“…One of us should stay,” said Admiral Arata.

“I’m sure they’d give her back if I went there and asked,” the Avatar was saying. “Once the storms—”

“You are not making their guests plural, Aang.”

“I command the Northern Fleet,” said Masuko. This was official etiquette amongst the admiralty for calling dibs.

-*Now*-

“Sir,” greeted the youngest of his two admirals, a man promoted post-siege to the rather vacant position of Admiral of the (Also Rather Vacant) Northern Fleet. He seemed to have acquired more ships, since then.

“Admiral Masuko,” Zuko said. “Are you… committing treason?”

“The fleet has no standing orders from the Fire Lord, Sir,” the man said. “Except to refrain from engagement with the Northern Water Tribe.”

The Water Tribe ships had drawn up short. The moon glittered over the generous distance they’d left between fleets.

(The Water Tribe, a hundred years from combat though they might be, had the tactical sense to realize they were no match for the steel wall ahead of them. Not unless the Ocean was inclined to intervene.

The ocean, who had lost its first ever boat race fair and square, was too busy replaying the adventure with some very confused merchant ships in the southern hemisphere, half of whom were going to make very good time.)

“Wrong question, Zuzu,” Azula said. “It’s not about whether he’s committing treason now. Admiral, what would you say if I ordered you to engage with them?”

“Then,” the admiral replied, “I would be committing treason.”

His tone was not disinclined; his gaze was on the vessel Zuko had just come from. And its deck, covered largely in blue-clad figures.

“Our own troops are on that ship,” Zuko said. “All the survivors of the invasion.”

The admiral took a breath in; closed his eyes, and let it out. When he opened them again, it was to the more distinctly Water Tribe ships that he turned. “Yes, Sir. And for the rest?”

The treason ship had not yet sailed. But all hands were, as they say, on deck.

Zuko squared his shoulders. “There has never been a reason for us to attack the Water Tribes.”

“Zuzu,” Azula started, eyes narrowing.

“There hasn’t. The South had no resources we wanted. Does the North even have land under its ice caps? Zhao’s attack was an unprovoked and entirely unnecessary waste of life.”

The admiral looked at those ships a moment more, before turning back to him. He inclined his head.

“They took you,” said Azula, who needed no further provocation.

“They didn’t even know they had me.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Let’s inform them.”

“Azula. This isn’t a dream.”

(She knew that. She just failed to see the relevance.)

“We can tell them,” Zuko allowed. “When we send them our ambassador. From the colonies.”

His sister tilted her head, slow as an owl-shrike. “ ‘Our ambassador’? Why, brother, one would almost think you were done running.”

He held his head as high as he ever had with a crown. “Let’s go back, Azula. And… thank you for coming for me,” he said.

“As if you needed it,” she sniffed. “I cannot fathom why you keep attempting rescues, if this is how lackluster they feel.”

“You came,” he said, because having now been on the other side, that was the part that felt important. “…Where are our eggs?” he asked, when it became clear she would not be trapped in the gooey feelings of their previous conversational topic.

Ty Lee, as it turned out, had three baby slings under her coat. Only two of them were occupied. Zuko watched her gaudy rock wobble from side-to-side on her head in the arctic breeze, one former-circus-acrobat’s height from a hard kiss with cold steel and possibly a quick roll into the ocean waves. Fire Nation railings were not made with child care in mind.

“Balance is good for its aura,” she said sagely.

“…I’ll take ours back now,” he said. And did. As he settled them under his own parka, their heat seeming to reach out into his core, Azula turned her gaze back to him.

“Let’s be clear, brother. From now on, only I’m allowed to leave.”

…That was fair.

Together, an entire fleet of steel—including one ship under new management—set course south.

“Zuko,” Azula asked much later, into the darkness of their shared captain’s quarters. She had, of course, claimed the actual bed. “Did you put on weight in a labor camp?”

“I slept, too,” Zuko said, from his floor futon. It was nostalgic.

She snorted into the dark. An entirely imperfect sound. “Shut up and be an egg heater.”

“You were the one who—”

“Ssssh.”

The captain’s quarters on an imperial class cutter were no prison. Nevertheless, Zuko slept quite well.

(It was very easy to confuse the wiggling of an egg for the rocking of a ship.)

The ice pack gave way to warmer seas; the polar bear geese stalk-swimming in their wake were replaced by dolphin-oarfish arcing at their bow. The northernmost colonies came into sight. The coastline was familiar to him from three years of sailing, in a way the shores of the Home Islands hadn’t been.

Zuko had never thought of the colonies as his, while he’d been banished. They’d not been the Fire Nation he was trying to get back to.

And the governor’s mansion at Shinchiheisen was certainly no imperial palace. Yet he’d returned to it as many times, now, as he’d ever returned home.

“Are we staying, Zuzu?” Azula asked, while Zuko moved his egg from its sling into the nest of his crossed legs. They were in Governor Shohei’s office, which was of course now Azula’s office. “Or are we finding that nice Earth Kingdom family of yours?”

There were stacks of correspondence by her hands. An older woman was collecting the pile in her outbox; this woman was not quite in the clothes of a head housekeeper, but what she wore now was far finer than a kitchen servant's.

"I see you've noticed my lion-ferret," Azula said.

"Lady Huian," Zuko said, bowing over the low table where he sat. (His egg wiggled forward as he did. This, too, was easily overlooked.) "Thank you for the rice balls."

"Thank you for not losing them in the sand," she said. And stopped to straighten his rather hopeless clothes in passing.

"Would you rather serve him?" Azula asked from behind her desk, like it wasn't a test.

"I've had enough gray hairs from this one." She applied herself to tidying Azula's space: refreshing the paper and envelopes and sealing wax, switching a new ink stick for the much ground down stub of its kin. Zuko had never wondered what happened to all those stubs, until he'd been balancing the budget on his own ship, and grinding them to their last. He'd spotted them in the palace, when he'd returned: when they were down to nubs, the higher servants gathered them up, and dumped them on the new hires.

The papers on Azula's commandeered desk were stacked higher than when Zuko had left, but not so high as to imply that she'd let a mere missing brother impact her political efficiency. Tax flow reports; records of import and export; a partially covered map marking the retreat of their soldiers back to colony territory. Theoretically, most would then be placed on ships home; theoretically, that entire fleet off their coast could be used for said ferrying.

There were crop forecasts. Another map, left significantly bare in its own corner of the desk, with new lines he hadn't understood until he'd spotted the ones around Omashu. These were the lines along which the Earth Kingdom was projected to shatter. There was no Earth King on the throne. Not even a figurehead with a bear to hold them together, when one prefecture's famine became another's refugee problem, when an army built over a hundred years found itself losing cohesion.

Unless they didn't. Unless they looked to the colonies, from which Fire Lord Iroh was withdrawing his support. Unless they studied their own maps and trade reports and crop forecasts.

Thus far, the Fire Nation—and a handful of children, small enough to fit on the back of a bison—were the only ones to acknowledge the end of the war.

"I don't think," Zuko replied, at long last, "that a nice Earth Kingdom family is going to help anything."

"You don't need to help, Zuko. That's hardly what being in charge is all about."

"It should be," he said.

"Yes," said Lady Huian. "It should."

Azula narrowed her eyes at the woman, before shifting her gaze to Zuko, a smile contorting her lips. "Adorable, isn't she? Now leave."

Her gaze did not shift back to the woman.

"I'll be back with snacks, Your Highnesses," Lady Huian said. She took the trash bin with her when she left, even if it was only half-full with ashes. No firebender would ever leave rough drafts about.

Azula saved her snort until after the door had closed.

"You could be nice," Zuko said.

Azula ran light fingers over the egg in her own sling. “She knows I’m not. Are you telling me to lie to our loyal servants, Zuzu?”

“Lying and being nice aren’t the same,” he tried pointing out.

“Mm,” she replied, skeptically.

Zuko flopped back on the floor, his own egg secure in his hands.

“Why is anyone listening to us?” he asked. “Why do they *want* to listen to us?”

“We’re royalty, Zuko. The commoners crave to be ruled. Who are we to deny them?”

“That’s not— What about being Ozai’s children makes us more fit to rule than, than… than the Water Tribe Ambassador?”

“You still don’t know his name.” She sounded delighted. (In her delight, she leaned forward, rather missing her own egg’s wiggle.)

“You do?” he challenged.

“Zuzu, some of us did our research before haring off after the overpowered child gang. They’d had wanted posters for months.”

“They spelled my name wrong on mine,” he muttered.

“Correction: I ordered your name spelled wrong on yours.”

“You—!”

“I missed your birthday, while you were—what was it, again?—ah yes, pretending to be dead in a ship explosion. What do you get for the boy who has nothing? The realization that he *is* nothing.”

“If I’m nothing, why do you want me to rule again?”

“I don’t,” she said. “You do.”

Zuko. Blinked.

“Zuzu. Instead of telling Uncle Usurper *no,* you very publicly declined to be crowned by him.” She started counting off on her fingers, like there was enough to warrant counting. “You then incited a riot at our nation’s most high profile prison, during which you gave a full list of political dissenters to the Water Tribe Ambassador—”

“You don’t know his name either.”

“—Whose name starts with an ‘s’, ends with an ‘a’, and does *not* rhyme with ‘Snoozles.’ Disregarding the implications of reintroducing dragons to the world, you then distinctly did not remove yourself from this lovely mansion when the governor began gathering his honey-buzzards around us. And when you were removed, you immediately threw yourself not only on the cause of liberating every single prisoner of war held by the North, but in making off with a significant percentage of their trained bending masters, with whom you wish to negotiate for continued healing services for your people.

“Tell me again,” she said, “how much you don’t want to rule.”

Zuko hadn’t thrown sparks at her since he was nine and she’d learned to neatly side-step, fan the flames, and blame him for the resulting destruction of imperial relics. But the urge had never quite gone away.

“I don’t want to. I just…”

“Can’t help yourself?”

“I’m bad at it. Why is everyone else *worse?”*

“You’re an idiot, Zuko. And you know you’re an idiot. Are you aware how rare that is, at the leadership level? Nepotism doesn’t breed competence, it breeds the illusion of it.”

“Then why do we have the right to rule?” he asked.

Azula, daughter of Ozai, granddaughter of Azulon, great-granddaughter of Sozin, and so on, etcetera, et al, fundamentally did not understand the question.

“Because long long ago,” she said, as one might to a particularly vacant toddler, “our honored ancestors won. And no one in our most illustrious line has been inbred enough to lose that power since. What, do you think someone else is going to do better?”

“Yes,” Zuko answered, with no hesitation.

“And this hypothetical someone,” she asked, “do you think people will agree they have the authority to? Or is ‘authority’ what we have, and what all those peasants crave?”

His egg seemed increasingly toasty in his hands. Had been, since he’d gotten it back. Probably he’d just grown too used to the cold in the North.

“And there you have it,” Azula said, as he continued not to answer. “Make yourself a council out of these mythical *someones* you expect can do better, and take the credit. History shall praise you for being wise enough to delegate.”

(As father had distinctly not done, when he'd commissioned his Special Day outfit, and gone to stand on the prow of an airship and burn things himself.)

"Then what will I do?" Zuko asked.

"What you always do: shed crumbs everywhere for the little ducks to flock after."

"…What will you do?"

"We've had this discussion, Dum-Dum. I want to sit there and be terrifying. All of the power with none of the expectations."

He wasn't sure they'd discussed it, so much as mutually hallucinated their way through thoughts of it.

"Otherwise," his sister added, speaking mostly to her egg, "what was being his daughter even *for."*

…He'd spent three years trying to convince himself that paternity had a meaning. She could have a little more time clinging to the idea, too. Having a destiny had felt a lot more certain than… whatever this was.

Lady Huian knocked. Entered, without particularly waiting for permission, as if she was quite certain she'd be given a ten second head start on any potential immolation.

She set a little sweets platter next to Azula, and what could have passed for a light meal on the table Zuko was nominally sitting at. She didn't stop patiently waiting until he sat up properly and took a bite.

“Shall we review your appointment book?” she asked, still watching him.

“…I have an appointment book?” Zuko asked.

“Normally,” Song said, setting her bag down. “People schedule with their doctors, not the other way around.”

Zuko wasn’t apologizing anymore. So he didn’t. He just sat on the edge of the bed, and tried not to look as much like he wanted to run as he did.

He’d *stolen* her *ostrich horse.*

And now he was shirtless. And she was being completely professional, which was a chilly change from when he’d sat on her porch on a warm spring night, and she’d tried to bond over burn scars.

His weren’t the same as hers. She had to know that, now.

“This healed… extremely well,” Song said, after long moments inspecting his arm.

“Waterbender,” Zuko said, by way of explanation. The women Katara had led south had set up a sort of wharf-side clinic, healing townspeople in exchange for the money and supplies they’d need on their journey. Song would be familiar with their work, by now.

“Almost too well,” Song said, and proceeded to remind him all about the stretches and massages he should have been doing to maintain flexibility and reduce pain, which he *knew,* he just… hadn’t done them as much as he should, with his face.

(It wasn't like his face was going to get *better.*)

She was still talking, when he interrupted.

"Why do you even care?"

Song's face froze for a moment. Then it slipped into a perfectly pleasant smile.

"Keeping you healthy," she reminded him, instead of any of the other things she could say, "keeps my people alive."

…Zuko may have forgotten that. He shouldn't have. "Are they… being treated well?"

They're still in prison, her smile said, without saying anything. In prison for defending their homes. Ozai—or rather, Captain Izumi, on behalf of Ozai—had awarded medals to the Home Guard for doing the same, on the Day of Black Sun. But those had been Fire Nation citizens defending Fire Nation soil from foreign attack: heroes. These were Earth Kingdom rebels, refusing to acknowledge that they now lived on colony lands: criminals.

Song started packing away her supplies. "I don't like how quickly the skin and muscle healed; they're tighter than they should be. We're going to meet for physical therapy in the mornings. If Your Majesty's schedule permits."

"Yes," Zuko said. "Thank you."

He wasn't a *Majesty;* Iroh had taken that. And Zuko hadn't let himself be crowned a *Highness* again. It was easier to take things away than to give them back.

His healer left. All her reasons to be loyal to him stayed, in a prison a stone's throw from the governor's mansion.

Katara hadn't seen *Zuko* since he'd left the *Kanna's Betrothal.*

(The ship's name hadn't been her idea. But it hadn't not been, either. And if it made the other women laugh, if it got Healer Yagoda telling stories of a friend she'd once known when her hair had been black, if it got the younger women spinning wilder and wilder tales of how one Northern girl could have possibly made it all the way south—of how much harder it must have been for her all alone, of how relatively smooth their own journey would be, with all of them together on their own ship, and the realization that every port they docked at would find their skills *valuable*—if it gave them courage to remember a woman most had never known and to tweak Pakku's nose in advance, then the *Kanna's Betrothal* would have its maiden voyage.)

Katara hadn't seen Zuko since his sister had come to collect him. He hadn't even asked to come back to their ship. And she hadn't gone over to Azula's, obviously. When she'd tried to enter the mansion, said she was there to see him, she'd been routed to an older woman with an appointment book.

Katara. Had needed to schedule an appointment. To see her mask buddy.

She was shown to a room with a low table. He was already seated on a cushion when she came in, a baby sling with a giant egg in it over his chest, and he half-stood as she entered and then saw her face and froze. And sat back down.

Katara sat, too. The servant who had shown her in returned a moment later, and did not put their tea set anywhere near Zuko's hands as they poured.

They left again.

"You… wanted to see me?" Zuko asked.

Katara crossed her arms. “You tricked me.” *Again,* she didn’t say, because not even she was sure if Ba Sing Se counted and that wasn’t what this was about right now.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Really,” she said. “Then why didn’t you take off your mask?”

“So I could… trick you?” he finished, with a wince. His face flushed, and his voice raised, and he didn’t meet her eyes. “You wouldn’t have worked with me if you’d known who I was.”

“No,” she said. “I wouldn’t have.”

They might or might not have gotten everyone out of there, if she hadn’t. That wasn’t what this was about, either.

“Did you care about us?” she asked. “Or were we just there to help you and your people escape?”

“We all did, together,” he said.

Which didn’t answer the question, She narrowed her eyes.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t… understand why yours needed to leave? It was their home. I was always trying to get home, and if there was something wrong there— The best place to change things is from home. isn’t it?” He wrapped an arm under his egg sling. “But. But I needed to leave, too. Not from the North. From my home. Because homes aren’t always a place you can change by staying, are they?”

She didn't think he meant any kind of broad, impersonal *you.*

"Maybe you couldn't," Katara said. "I'm going home."

"I'm… happy for you? I hope it's how you remember. Or better."

"I'll make it better," she said, because she already knew home wasn't going to be the place she remembered. It *shouldn't* be: all of this, from the moment Aang woke up, from the moment her father left, from the moment her mother died to keep her alive, all of this was to make things better. "You can make things better, too. Not just for your own people."

"Do you think the Fire Nation can be better?" he asked.

If he'd said it like a rhetorical question, or like a test, she wouldn't have answered.

He didn't. He said it like a question he'd been asking himself.

"Yes," she said, after a long moment. And she didn't even snark about how it could hardly be worse. "But what's *your* idea of better?"

He didn't immediately answer. Which was, actually, a better answer than she could have hoped for.

"I think," he said. "I can see why Azulon continued the war. I still don't know why Sozin would start it, I don't know that I want to understand that, but. But we have a jail full of Earth Kingdom rebels. They've been attacking the colonists. And if I let them out, they'll probably keep attacking. And there have been attacks on our troops as they retreat; if we don't secure an alliance with someone in the Earth Kingdom who can actually enforce it, then there will be attacks on the colonies themselves when the famines start, and—and there would be fewer mouths to feed if they all died attacking us, wouldn't there? And less people to complain about it. And of course we'd move more colonists into the lands left empty, otherwise we'd just be leaving fields fallow, and weren't they complaining about a lack of food anyway? If

they aren't going to accept the peace I offer, if they're just going to keep attacking, why *shouldn't* we keep winning?"

Katara was in the middle of yet another Fire Nation stronghold. Without the backup of her friends; with an entire ship of women depending on her. Therefore, she did not pop the cork of her water skin, not even to redirect her desire to strangle the boy in front of her. She settled for clenching her fist in her lap, the nails digging in.

"My idea of making the Fire Nation better," he said. "Is figuring out how to get my people to view continuing this war as a loss." He stopped staring at his egg long enough to meet her eyes. "But it would be easier to just keep the war going. It's what everyone expects."

She had expected it from him, when they'd landed in Caldera.

She unclenched her fists. Crossed her arms. "Since when do you ever do what's easy?"

"…What?"

"You followed us all over the world."

"I'm not apologizing for that," he immediately cut in.

Of course he wasn't. Suki had told her about his *no apologizing, no bowing* rule. And that wasn't her point, anyway.

"You fought me in the North, during a full moon, with a snow storm outside."

"Capturing the Avatar was my mission. I had to. Well, I didn't. But I thought I did."

That was probably as close to an apology as she was getting. Still not the point.

"How did you get into the city, Zuko?" she asked. And then realized she knew her mask buddy well enough to know. *"Turtle seal tunnels,* Zuko?"

"They worked," he said, with such outraged indignity that she wanted to rage-bend a blanket at his face.

"So make it work," she said. "Find the stupidest, hardest to kill, most Zuko way to keep this war from starting again. Make that your new mission."

He paused. It was a very long pause. "…You're probably going to regret giving me a mission. My father certainly did. And, ah. I didn't actually succeed. At my last one."

"Do better," she said.

(And, wow. She could sound like his sister and his father, simultaneously.)

"Do better," she repeated, "starting now. My people are earning supplies, but the coal we need is under military control. And we need guarantees that the Fire Nation fleet won't attack us on the way south. In fact, I think you need to formally cede the *Kanna's Betrothal* to us.

"…The what?"

"It's named after my Gran-Gran," Katara said, with a certain vindictive pride. "You've met."

It took him a second. The flush on his face told her exactly when he remembered his visit to the South, and his manhandling of an elder.

“The North stole it from you, and we stole it from the North,” she added. “It’s ours.”

“…Has anyone told you that stealing is wrong?”

“Has anyone told the Fire Nation?” she said.

He winced.

“Sokka tried,” she allowed. She still had that waterbending scroll. She was going to invest in some of that beautiful clear glass she’d seen coming from the mixed fire-and-earth glassmakers of the colony’s workshops, and frame that scroll.

It took her a moment to notice the way his face had lit up, in a way entirely inappropriate for this conversation. Took another moment, to realize why.

“You still didn’t know his name. Did you.” She did not need to make it a question.

“It’s Sokka,” he said, with a grin that made her want to waterwhip him.

“Passage south,” she reminded, instead. “And the right to refuel coal at any port.”

He leaned forward, his posture relaxing enough to emphasize just how stiff he’d been up until now. …She’d relaxed, too.

“Okay,” he said. “I can do that. I think? I’m really not sure why anyone’s listening to me. What do you have to trade? I could try to make it free, but you’d get less of a run-around if there was documented proof that you’d paid somehow. Military supply officers don’t like giving things to people outside their command chain for free.”

He'd said *outside their command chain* with a very certain scowl, like there were years of frustration behind it.

"We can offer the services of the finest waterbending healers," she said. "And the safe return of all Fire Nation prisoners taken by the Northern Water Tribe."

"Are you… ransoming my prisoners back to me?"

"No," she said. "I'm opening the first treaty between the Fire Nation colonies and the newly expanded Southern Water Tribes."

Katara remembered him complaining, back in his fancy palace, that the Gaang didn't have any real negotiating power.

As she was a little sister, Zuko should have known that would come back to bite him.

"You could join the circus," Ty Lee offered. She'd brought her own rock over for an egg play date.

"…Why am I joining the circus?" Zuko asked.

"It's about exploring your options, silly. Azula said the Earth Kingdom family idea was out. But you don't need family, if you join the circus!"

Which had probably been a prime selling point, when the septuplet had left home.

"What would I do, juggle?" Zuko asked.

“No, you could do sword tricks. Why would you say juggling?”

(Somewhere rather far away and behind the world’s greatest walls, a girl he’d once gone on a date with was still wondering that. *Juggling,* Li? Really?)

(Still not Jin’s worst date.)

“I’ll keep the circus under advisement, Ty Lee. Thanks. Um. …Send in my next appointment?”

“I’ve still got five degrees with you,” Ty Lee said.

“She does,” Lady Huian agreed.

“Ooo,” said Ty Lee. “Let’s do backbends! It’s really hard to stay all tense after a good backbend.”

Lady Huian politely refreshed their snacks tray, abandoning him to five more degrees of Ty Lee.

“You’re late,” Azula said.

“My last appointment went long.”

“You’re *relaxed.”*

Zuko flushed, and sat down. Everyone else was already there: the governor, the northern fleet's admiral, Lieutenant Jee on behalf of the former prisoners, and the bounty hunter who had kidnapped him.

Zuko stared. "I want my coat back."

Jun crossed her arms, and leaned back. "And I want free transport home to any of my people that need it, lodging and job training for any of them that want to stay here, and honorable discharges from all future military service, complete with full pensions, for the lot."

"Your people?"

"I didn't see you standing up for them, Shark Bait."

Jee cleared his throat. "We're aware she's not actual nobility, Sir."

"Are you?" Zuko asked, drawing on the same deep skepticism he'd used during two and a half years of the lieutenant's shipboard decision making.

"You are?" Jun asked, a beat off.

"Yes, Sir." Jee shifted. Underneath him, his chair creaked with a bone-deep aggrievement. "She's your body guard. …Sir?"

Zuko looked to Azula, because he could at least count on her to—

Azula was smiling. It was the kind of smile someone unfamiliar with teenage girls and Greenland sharks seals might mistake as pleasant.

The governor had looked politely lost since this conversation had begun. With the delicacy of a man used to the kind of meetings that came with minutes, he tapped his stack of papers on the table in front of him.

“Might I suggest we start by reviewing the lodging and health care requirements of the rescued prisoners?”

He had spreadsheets for them. His clerks must be almost as good as Zuko’s had been.

And so they descended into practical minutia, like spaces required, expected costs, and the time it would take to transport them all back to the Home Islands, assuming the aid of their good admiral and his ships.

Their good admiral did not disagree, which… Zuko was not going to comment on, because the man was still technically in Fire Lord Iroh’s chain of command, and had not technically committed any treason. The popularity of being the one to bring their people home—which was the result of a purely internal water tribe affair, as formally attested to by Master Katara—should secure him enough popularity to continue being an admiral.

“I’d like for as many as possible to leave with you when your ships do, Admiral. Any who are stable enough to be moved.” Zuko said. “We can provide the extra supplies for them. …I think.”

There was silence at the table. The kind where people were sneaking glances to each other. Glances that did not include him.

He looked to the governor. “Do we… have enough supplies?”

“There are certainly not so many of them as to tax our reserves,” the man said. “But I’m not sure that’s the problem, Your Majesty.”

Admiral Masuko and Zuko's former lieutenant exchanged a look.

"And the ones who don't want to leave, Sir?" Jee asked.

It was immediately clear to all that Zuko hadn't considered *not going home* as a thing people could want. …But he had more experience with the concept than he'd had in summer.

Jee shifted in his chair. It creaked, eloquently. "The men and I have been talking," he began, which back on the *Wanyi* would have been the point where Zuko would have sent Iroh in with tea to head off a mutiny. "Some of ours do want to go back to the Home Islands. Some weren't from there, to begin with. And some want help bringing their families over here."

"They have to know that—" Zuko started, and wasn't sure how he'd finish, but apparently Jee thought he knew, because he interrupted just as readily as he had during officer briefings.

"They know, Sir."

"They aren't even wrong," said the inexplicable bounty hunter still sitting in on their meeting. She gave the most making-fun-of-how-a-noble-might-shrug shrug Zuko had ever seen. "If Uncle Groper is serious about stopping the war, your economy's about to crash. The main islands export, what? War machines, colonial leadership, and soldiers? This side of the ocean's got all the raw resources and at least as much land, not even counting what you guys haven't conquered yet. You literally don't need those islands; they need you."

"How do you even know what an export is?" Zuko asked. "You're a *bounty hunter."*

"She's a *what?"* Jee asked.

"She is," the governor confirmed, looking relieved that someone had finally addressed the elephant-shrew in the room.

“You think an all-leather outfit is cheap, kid?” Jun asked. “Why do you think I worked the colony circuit? War is profit. Half my catches were your soldiers, running away; the other half were your escaped mine workers, aka the other guy’s soldiers. And absolutely nobody shuts up when they’re trussed up over a shirshu’s back. A businesswoman hears things.”

Azula was grinning again. Just a hair wider. Just a little sharper. Not in any way helpful. She was, indeed, sitting there looking terrifying, and letting him do all the work.

“If they already lived in the colonies, that’s… fine. Okay.” Zuko started. “No one should blame them for that. But if they belong to the Home Islands, they need to go back. I didn’t rescue them to see them branded traitors.”

“Excuse you,” Jun corrected, “we rescued ourselves.”

Zuko open his mouth. Shut it. Opened it again. “I am not arguing this.”

“Great,” Jun said, her leather creaking with the insubordination of any officer’s armor as she crossed her legs. “Then the ones who want to stay are staying. How are we handling getting their families? Admiral?”

“We currently have full run of the ports, Sir.” Zuko’s admiral replied. To the bounty hunter wearing Zuko’s stolen coat. “And with the diminished fleet resources since the Northern invasion, we’ve been lending ships across to the central fleets. I can arrange patrols to any island we—”

“No,” Zuko interrupted. “No, you— Traitors get—” He motioned vaguely, and definitely not in a face-ward direction, or a bounty-hunter-ward one, “they get *killed.* I’m not going to let a ship full of prisoners walk straight into execution warrants. Let them go home first, at least. Talk to their families; think it over. Give them the chance to return. Then if they still want— Then they can desert. But they need to go home, first.”

“And how did that work out for you, Zuko?” Azula asked, not helping.

Admiral Masuko met his gaze steadily. “Fire Lord Iroh didn’t get my men out of the North, Sir.”

“Neither did I, when I was Fire Lord.”

“It didn’t take you long once you joined the colonies, Sir.”

“…Admiral. You’re going home.”

“With due respect,” put in Lieutenant Jee, his tone exactly as *duely respectful* as Zuko had remembered, “if we’re not in your chain of command, then you can’t order us to leave. Sir.”

“Ahem,” Governor Shohei said, with an agenda-reasserting paper shuffle. “That does lead us to the next item. Regarding your titles.”

Which was certainly one way of asking whether they were *Highnesses* or *Majesties;* whether they claimed any titles at all.

“I won’t be your Fire Lord,” Zuko said. “You have one.”

The governor made a note in the minutes he was keeping. He didn’t break eye contact.

“…But. I think it might be a good thing, if our people could say no to the Fire Lord, and not be hunted down by bounty hunters.”

Said bounty hunter was not taking notes.

“I will not start a civil war,” Zuko continued, after a deep breath. “I won’t bow to the Fire Lord. I won’t kneel to the governors and nobles who run the colonies, either. If I am to be

your prince, I will not be a figurehead. You will swear to me. I will listen to you, but you will listen to me. I am your prince, Azula is your princess. and if these lands are Fire Nation colonies, then the people here are our citizens. *All* of them are our citizens."

He knew the governor had been gathering his contacts again, like he had before Zuko's unplanned arctic field trip. Bringing together the other governors and the nobles and merchants who'd spent a hundred years finding opportunities in this war.

"Consider whether you can accept that," Zuko finished, "before you start making our crowns."

The man had stopped taking notes. He didn't seem to know what a safe reply could possibly be, to a teenager who might or might not be his prince.

…If Zuko was going to be a prince again, he didn't want people to wonder if it was *safe* before they answered him.

"Right," Jun said, when the silence had stretch long and longer. "Politicking aside; can we get back to sorting my people?"

The governor fell back on the safety of his papers. "The next item for consideration—"

The doors to the room opened. Lady Huian stood in them, very slightly out of breath. "Excuse me. The Avatar has landed his bison in the courtyard."

…Of course he had.

In the following commotion, it was entirely too easy to miss the quiet sound of an egg tooth poking through a shell's inner membrane. *Pip,* it said.

And, not to be outdone, so did its sibling.

Déjà vu did not exist in any of their world's languages, but the Avatar and his companions were working hard to invent it.

Which was to say: Zuko stood in a courtyard, his officials and supporters and one sister talking a little too pleasantly with a bounty hunter arrayed behind him, and waited for Avatar Aang and his fellow children to descend.

Ambassador Sokka was the first down. He paused, inexplicably, to glare at Zuko's hair. Which Zuko tried not to be self-conscious about, given that Lady Huian had just fixed it so he knew it was as perfect as it could ever get, even though he could *feel* that one strand that was always out of place—

"Sokka! Aang! Toph!"

Right. Because he'd already had one Team Avatar member on the ground. Katara came running up the port street, probably having discovered exactly how easy it was to spot a bison flying over open ocean from the deck of a ship.

"Sister," Sokka said, after the hugs that seemed requisite in their group.

"I can explain," said Katara.

Zuko snorted, his gaze drifting to his own sister. Azula glared at him.

"Just because a parallel exists does not make it funny, Zuzu," she whispered.

“—and we were so worried,” Avatar Aang was gushing, still in the middle of his own hug with her. “The Northern Tribe said you were visiting but their messages were really sketchy and it never seemed like the hawks with letters from *you* were getting through, and there’s this big storm front that Appa was acting really weird about, he wouldn’t go *north*. But then we heard rumors of a Fire Navy ship with a Water Tribe crew and— Uh. Hi, Zuko.”

“Avatar Aang,” Zuko said. Looking at said Avatar. Standing on Fire Nation soil. Again. Had father been this frustrated with his son’s banishment, every time Zuko overstayed his time at any given port? …Though Zuko hadn’t had time to make the Avatar’s banishment official. And Iroh would have rescinded it, even if he had.

“You look better.”

Zuko blinked, not sure what to do with that. Or with the kid’s bright and apparently genuine smile.

“…Thanks?”

The little monk *beamed.*

Zuko scowled. “Is this the point where you capture me, Avatar? Bring me back to the Fire Lord?”

Yes, Sokka was mouthing, in the background.

“That *would* be pretty funny,” Aang said, after he’d re-found his smile. “But I haven’t even threatened any villagers yet.”

Zuko’s scowling intensified.

Aang shuffled his feet. “Sorry. No, we just came for Katara. But while you’re here, and we’re here—”

“We are not having peace talks again,” Zuko said. “Except with Katara.”

“Excuse me?” squawked Sokka.

Zuko crossed his arms. “She’s the chosen delegate of the Northern Water Tribe’s self-expatriation movement.”

“Katara,” Sokka said. “Sister. What did you do, and did it involve pretending to be a spirit and/or acts of foreign property damage?”

“Yes,” said Katara, as unrepentant as if she had an entire bag full of stolen waterbending scrolls.

(They couldn’t be stolen if Yagoda had brought them from her private collection.)

“Yes to which one, Katara? *Yes to which one?”*

“Not peace talks,” Aang said, ignoring his friends behind him. “Just… talks? And Iroh gave us all letters for you, in case we ran into you again. Which, *wow,* I always thought you were really good at tracking us. But this ‘running into you’ thing just kind of happens, doesn’t it? And I know you probably don’t want him to come here in person—”

Zuko now knew the signs of a heart attack, because Song had finally gotten around to taking his full medical history, and had come back the next day to pin a list of symptoms to his wall. So he knew this wasn’t a heart attack.

But she hadn’t put up panic attack symptoms, so he wasn’t ruling that out.

“He can’t come here,” Zuko said, over whatever the Avatar was still saying.

Which is the point where Team Avatar’s fourth member shoulder-checked the boy out of the way.

She stepped straight into Zuko’s personal space. Tilted her head. “This the arm you burned at that prison?” she asked, pointing.

“…No? I mean, yes. But Katara healed me.”

“Good,” she said, and socked him.

“Ow.”

“When’s my field trip?”

“When’s your… what?”

“I’m thinking lavabending,” she said. “Apparently your grandpa used to be able to do it. It can’t be that hard to find an active volcano to practice on. Ready to re-discover a bending style?”

“I,” Zuko said, feeling much more grounded, “do not want to be near an active volcano with any of you people ever again.”

“…This is a before-I-joined thing, isn’t it. How did they not tell me about the *volcano.”*

“Two volcanoes,” Zuko ruthlessly tattled.

“Ow,” said Sokka, when it was his turn to be punched. “Toph, no intra-group conflict in front of the Ex-Fire-Lord Club!”

Azula raised an eyebrow in Zuko’s direction. “Should I feel included?”

“Is the group exclusive?” Zuko replied. And while they didn’t share the same sort of cackle as they might have a few weeks ago, they certainly shared a snort.

“What are you planning?” asked the Ambassador Formerly Known as Snoozles, with narrowed eyes.

…It was time for Zuko to figure that out. It wasn’t something he’d be figuring out with them.

But he could already give one answer, with great personal confidence.

“Something stupid.”

“That was rhetorical,” Sokka shouted, as Zuko turned away. “That was rhetorical, Prince Worst Ideas! Hey, I’m not done talking with you!”

“Make an appointment,” Zuko said, not looking back.

“…Let’s just capture him,” Sokka said, watching Zuko disappear inside. “Appa’s in.”

The bison lowed in front of the mansion doors, which were almost but not completely the right size to follow the prince through. He tilted his horns, and tried another, equally inadequate angle. *Thunk.*

“Just toss him in the saddle and go,” said Sokka.

Katara mistook *wistful* for *joking.*

“…Can I schedule an appointment?” Aang asked, of an older woman who’d come out with the prince.

He could.

He did.

“Why,” Zuko asked.

Lady Huian, who pointedly continued not to work for him, smiled. And closed the door after the little monk, leaving them alone.

The Avatar sat down across from Zuko. The Avatar started staring at Zuko’s egg. Zuko tugged the side of its sling pointedly higher, and also cleared his throat.

“I’m still not restarting the war, Avatar.”

The little monk sat up straighter. And remembered that Zuko’s eyes were up here.

“I’m not here to talk about that. Well, I would be, but I believe you. But I think not everyone will? And I don’t think everyone else is even *trying* to stop. Katara said the Northern Tribe still has those ships, and I’m actually getting a little nervous about the Earth Kingdom generals searching for Kuei, because *searching for* and *wanting back* aren’t really the same thing, you know?”

The kid realized who he was talking to. Laughed, nervously. His fingers were twiddling, chasing each other in circles like he needed something between them. Where had his staff gone, anyway? Zuko hadn’t seen him with it since that ghost town.

The boy continued, his words tumbling one after the other, and was he still on the same breath? “Of course you know. But— We should all be talking. So the war really doesn’t start again. I don’t really know how it all happened, a hundred years ago. But I don’t think more talking would have hurt. So here I am! Talking.”

He ended with a too-bright smile.

Zuko closed his eyes. Took in a slow breath of his own, because it was not his place to tell the kid to *breathe.* He wasn’t the Avatar’s teacher, and would never be. Regardless, the little monk took a mirroring breath.

“Why did you take my father’s fire?” Zuko asked.

“…I thought it would end the war. And I didn’t want to kill him. I don’t think killing people fixes the things that made them, and it’s not what my people would have wanted me to do. I’m all that’s left of them. Ozai’s the one that thinks killing is winning.”

It was polite of him, to say *Ozai* instead of *the Fire Nation.*

“So letting him choose what winning looks like,” the kid continued, “letting everyone keep believing that’s the only way, just because they don’t remember that there used to be others—

If the only way to win is by the rules Ozai and the other Fire Lords set, isn't that losing? We can't let the same people who start the wars decide how they end."

…It was easy to forget, with a kid that only came up to Zuko's chest, that he was dealing with the collected wisdom of thousands of years.

"That's what I think, anyway," the kid said, looking down at his twiddling fingers again.

Or maybe this wasn't the wisdom of the Avatar speaking. Maybe it was just Aang.

Zuko let out a breath. "Under what circumstances would you take someone else's bending away?"

"I… don't know. Master Shaw—"

(Who was Master Shaw?)

"—Is helping me learn more about it. And about bending. I'm waking up with the sun, now. Sort of." The kid gave him a hopeful smile. Because he was both an ancient spirit, and a twelve-year-old.

But then, Zuko was a caravan wreck of a sixteen-year-old, and a prince.

Being born to power was, perhaps, not the most effective system.

"I still don't want you on Fire Nation soil," Zuko said, and pressed on, even as the kid's smile faltered. "But. I'll read Iroh's letter. And yours, too. If you want to send them. Aang."

The kid *beamed.* Zuko was already regretting this.

“Are you sure it’s okay, leaving me here?” Zuko asked. “You know it’s not what he actually wants.”

The kid sat up straighter. Stopped having trouble meeting Zuko’s eyes. “Iroh is my teacher, and my friend. And he’s really old and he knows a lot of things and I don’t think I could have won the war—err, stopped your father—without him. But he’s not always right. Back when— When I was twelve, instead of a hundred and twelve, people traveled more. And not everyone liked having strangers come through their towns, even then. Especially if you were any kind of nomad, not just an air nomad. There were already governments that demanded passports, and gates you were supposed to enter through instead of fly over or go through secret tunnels around, and. And I had a lot of friends, but not everyone I met was *nice.* But we were just living. And you’re just living. Air is freedom. I think we could use more people traveling around and just living again. Being different, and talking to each other. …Are you sure it’s right for you, staying here?”

“I don’t know what’s right,” Zuko said. “But Azula said I can get advisors.”

The kid snorted. “When we first met, I wouldn’t have believed you had a sense of humor.”

“I don’t.”

The kid *laughed.*

Zuko scowled. “You may stay in town until Master Katara is ready to depart. But we are not having more peace talks.”

“Of course not,” Avatar Aang chirped. “Those are going to be at the South Pole.”

It was entirely unclear to Zuko whether he’d just been invited.

(It was entirely unclear to the rest of the world whether he should be.)

Inside its shell, a little egg tooth began the exhausting process of zipping a dragon-sized circle.

“Hello,” said the teenager wearing a fake moustache. “I’m Wang Fire, local citizen. And I would like to schedule a meeting with Prince Zuko.”

“…I’m afraid his schedule is full today,” said Lady Huian, not opening the appointment book. “Try again tomorrow.”

“Maybe tomorrow, buddy,” Sokka said, patting a giant furry side. “Let’s get that saddle off.”

Appa groaned a groan of agreeable disappointment.

Sokka kept a loop of the good rope with him, just in case.

“If someone kidnapped my brother,” Mai said, unscheduled, “what would you do?”

“You have a brother?” asked Zuko, sitting up in his bed. He hadn’t been sleeping, anyway.

Mai sat down on the other side. Started sharpening her knives. Or at least… sharpening her pre-sharpened pieces of metal?

(Mai had met Engineer Hanako en-route. They had exchanged prison souvenirs, as one professional shiv maker to another.)

“Yes, Zuko,” said Mai, as she made a piece of ship steel progressively more aerodynamic. “I have a brother. He’s two. …Three.”

“That’s… little.”

Yes, Zuko, she did not say.

“Uh. Well if he’s three, he’s not helping with his own escape. But he’d be pretty easy to carry. So I’d probably just… sneak in, grab him, and run? Is your brother kidnapped?”

“Not currently,” Mai said, worryingly. “And if the kidnappers made it a hostage exchange?”

“…Do they like the hostage we have?”

“Yes.”

“Are they likely to double-cross us?”

“No.”

“Then… we should do the hostage exchange?”

“It’s a political hostage,” Mai said. “For a toddler.”

She had more shivs. Zuko had his own sharpening supplies. He picked one up, and started helping.

“…So we *don’t* want to make the exchange? Then sneak in, grab him, and run,” Zuko returned to.

Mai eyed the edge of a blade critically. Twirled it over her finger. Then tested its value as a throwing knife, against the threads of a spider-mouse nest the servants hadn’t noticed yet. The web fluttered down from the ceiling. The spider-mouse squeaked and self-evicted itself from Zuko’s room.

She hadn’t tested it in his direction. So whatever this conversation was really about, at least she wasn’t angry at him.

“That’s nice,” she said, finally. “Now guess what your sister did.”

“Do you,” he started, “still have a brother?”

“It was the Avatar’s group that had him. Apparently their lemur did the kidnapping.”

“The lemur took him?” Zuko blinked. “Your brother is definitely small enough for an easy rescue, then.”

Mai eyed Zuko, egg sling and all. Mai let out a sigh.

“My dad is coming,” she said.

“A lot of the governors are,” Zuko said. “…Wait. Is this a political interview? Are you deciding whether your dad should support us?”

“He’s already decided,” said Mai. “You aren’t Iroh.”

…Which was, Zuko feared, what most of his so-called supporters were basing their decision on.

Mai looked at him, a moment more. Nodded once, seeing as he’d gotten it. Then she returned to the only consistently interesting thing in the world: her knives.

“If they try backstabbing you,” she said, “and the circus thing doesn’t work out—”

“There is no *circus thing,* what has Ty Lee been telling people—”

“—we could always be pirates,” she finished.

Zuko huffed a laugh. He’d always appreciated Mai’s sense of humor.

“…Mai. That was a joke, right? Mai?”

“Mutinies at the fleet level aren’t boring,” she said. “And now I know a guy.”

“Mai.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “If I take to the high seas, I’ll leave you a letter.”

“I,” Suki was stating, with a certain delicacy, “would not advise Fire Lord Iroh to ask his fleet admirals about their loyalty.”

“Suki,” Sokka said, “that is. A very good reason Iroh *should— Fire Jerk incoming, hide,”* and he tried to pull her away from their very obvious public collusion, but she did not budge at all. Had her biceps always been that big, strong, and distracting?

“Suki,” said Fire Jerk said, crossing his own big biceps. “we need to talk.”

“Zuko,” Sokka said. “what unfortunate timing. Suki and I were just catching up. Carnally. Hence the dragging towards a deserted alleyway.”

Zuko looked like someone had shoved a dead canary-puppy in his face. Suki did not have a look, because there was a palm on her face, blocking any such looks.

“I could… come back later?”

“Please do,” Suki said, behind aforementioned hand. “I’m not done telling him all your secrets yet.”

“Okay,” said Prince Moron.

“Uh,” said Sokka. “And you’re… not worried? About her doing just that?”

“She will,” Zuko said, with a tone that further implied *obviously.* “But I trust her.”

“Uh,” said Sokka, who was beginning to feel a little actually bad about this.

But not bad enough.

“So hey,” Sokka said, “while you’re here. Can I talk with you? Alone? Over there. By the bison.”

“Later,” Zuko said, brushing past. “I have people to yell at.”

“You cannot requisition a ship,” Zuko said, where most people would have said *hello.*

Katara lifted an eyebrow at him, as she knelt by a healing pallet set up on the docks in front of the *Kanna’s Betrothal.* A ship that could be defined as a requisition, if one squeezed the term.

“You can’t requisition *another* ship,” he corrected.

“I’m not,” she said, her hands steady over the leg of her patient. “The Fire Nation officers I was traveling with are.”

“And you can’t keep the prisoners,” he continued trying to insist.

“The Fire Nation criminal prisoners,” she said.

“Does this conversation need to happen now?” asked resident spooky guy Helmsman Kyo. Who then looked at his prince’s face. “Sorry, yes it does, carry on.”

“You can’t—” Zuko took in a deep breath, and apparently realized both that she could and had and that it technically hadn’t been her. “You can take the rest of them, but the Southern Raider stays here.”

“Does he,” said Katara.

“You can’t *hand pick* which soldiers to prosecute.”

“Really?” she asked pleasantly, her water glowing very intensely under her hands. “So who can?”

Zuko tossed up his hands. “I don’t know! But if he’s guilty, he’ll be guilty in colonial courts, too. And it won’t look like Iroh is doing *vengeance trials* because one of the Avatar’s entourage *asked nicely!”*

“Did I ask nicely?” Katara asked.

The prince’s response was best onomatopoeiad as *rrrrr*. “What are you even trying him for?”

“Killing,” she said, with the kind of pleasantness that had Kyo holding perfectly and exactly still under her bendy-glowy hands, “my mother.”

Which at least got him to take a breath.

“…Can we try Ozai, too?” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m… not sure that’s actually a crime, under Fire Nation law. Even assuming she was a civilian, if he just… claims he felt threatened…”

“She’d surrendered.”

“But that’s obviously not what *he’s* going to say, and. Ugh. What even *is* a crime, during war? Because we can’t just say *everything—”*

“Even if it’s true.”

“Yes, even if it’s true, or that’s every soldier, and then every soldier is going to back whoever wants the war to keep going because it’s either that or— or get personally sent to jail by the Avatar’s team, apparently. And that’s not even getting into the people who weren’t on the field, just *giving orders*, and the ones designing the weapons and building them, and the merchants supplying everything and the people overseeing the prisoner camps and mines and— We’re going to need to establish rules on what’s a crime even in war, then figure out who did *those,* and how are we even going to collect evidence when most of it is murdered mothers and burned villages—”

(What was even the point of growing back his hair if he was just going to tear it out.)

“The criminals,” Katara repeated, “are going back to your country’s capital for trial. All of them. Your own people, in your own courts. It’s better than any Earth Kingdom rebels or Water Tribe pirates were given.”

“…We still need to figure this out.”

“We do. But. Not just us.”

War crimes, and what those even were, would apparently be joining the agenda at the peace talks.

Zuko continued to hover.

“Zuko. I’m trying to concentrate, here.”

Waterbending was excellent for easing inflammation and getting blood vessels back in order; less so, at resetting slightly misaligned bone, which was more like stone.

Maybe Toph could—

That was a horrifying thought and Katara was never touching it again.

“She’s trying to concentrate, here,” echoed Helmsman Kyo.

“Go bug Sokka,” Katara said.

Zuko did not want to go bug Sokka. But Sokka had maneuvered between Zuko and the path back to the mansion, and Zuko was *not* taking the long way around, he had too much to do. Now that he was doing things again. If Lady Huian would stop scheduling *physical therapy* and cancel Ty Lee’s reoccurring *egg play dates* and allow him to choose his own sleep schedule, maybe he could make some real progress—

“So about that talk over by the bison,” Sokka said, stepping even farther in his way.

Zuko stopped walking. Took in a deep breath. Did not body-check the Water Tribe Ambassador. “Can we make it quick?”

“Yes, definitely,” the teen said, starting to lead him away. “this will be *very* quick.”

Which was the point Suki hooked her arm through Zuko’s, and pulled him back towards his original path.

“Me first,” she said. “Sokka never.”

“Suki please,” the boy shouted after them, *“Suki. Don’t I deserve nice things?”*

As this was the same thought that had led to Azula pulling a prison alarm, it immediately killed Sokka’s chances of a *very quick* moment alone with Zuko.

Appa continued chewing his breakfast and watched the prince go, with approximately ten tons of patience.

Suki leaned over, elbows on her knees, palms pressed together in front of her face.

“Okay. That sure is a thing to drop on someone this early in the morning. Let me think,” she said. “Just. Let me think.”

She took a breath in. Out.

“You’re going to need a council. Not just those people the governor invited, and not just Fire Nation citizens. The people who actually live here.”

“The Fire Nation does live—”

“If you want me being your conscience,” she said, “then this is your conscience speaking: shut up, and listen.”

“To who?” he asked, like that being a serious question didn’t make her want to scream more.

“We’ll work on it,” she said.

“…So should I?”

“Do it,” Suki said, straightening up. “Be stupid. It’s your primary skill.”

“Thank you for your advice,” he said, “Councilor Suki.”

Which was the point where a dragon snout finally, finally pushed its way through its egg shell. This would have been a much easier (and more easily noticed in advance) endeavor if someone hadn’t placed its egg *upside down* into the sling.

The first squeak with which it graced the world was an entirely affronted one.

Zuko stared down. As did Suki. At the scaly red head sticking out, baring its tiny baby teeth; at the itty-bitty claws grasping the rim of its shell; at the wing it would definitely grow into wedged halfway-up next to its ear.

Rwoar, it tried, but what came out was more of a murderous cheep.

“Why is it always dragons with you,” Suki said, already tired. Maybe she could schedule some Ty Lee time.

Azula’s egg became the secondborn, as was only fitting; like her, it would be forced to prove its worth.

The hatchling raised its golden snout triumphantly into the air, before physics asserted its dominance, rolling hatchling and egg over and depositing both in Azula's lap. Rather than looking displeased, the creature took this as its cue to blink ignorant baby eyes up at her. When she offered a generous hand to correct its indignity, it wiggled free two tiny arms with which to grasp her thumb, and settled its baby teeth against her skin in the most delicate of grips. It was still looking up at her. Its eyes were blue, which was its saving color.

"We shall tell them that your first action was to bite me," Azula said, suitably abridging their history together.

The hatchling had fallen asleep in her palm, and was therefore unable to correct the record.

Song was training as a country doctor, which had not left her unprepared to be a vet.

"Well," she said, returning a hissing blanket to Zuko, and letting Azula's golden dragon stumble-tumble its way off her lap and into its mistress' waiting hands, "they're certainly the healthiest dragons I've ever examined."

"Peasant," warned Azula.

"They're both walking well, with no sign of splayed legs or wry necks. Scales are glossy. Hearts and lungs seem strong."

Hiss, Zuko's blanket continued, as he tried to unwrap it and was met with teeth dragging it closed again. Meanwhile, a tail was wiggle-lashing its way out the bottom, quickly followed by its hind-claws.

"Initial muscle tone seems fine. I have no idea what a proper diet would be, but I'd suggest starting with cooked ground meat, and watching for any signs of distress. Make sure they

have water access at all times. And heat. …Though I doubt that will be an issue, for firebenders.”

Azula’s dragon had draped itself around the heat-shimmer of her neck and taken the tip of its tail between its teeth, making a little golden necklace. This would have been more dignified without its little fork-tipped tongue constantly fluttering out to taste the air.

“And,” Zuko said, “about the other thing?”

Song could only pretend to rearrange her doctor’s bag for so long. She set it aside; set her hands in her lap. Met his eyes.

“Prince Zuko,” she said, because Junior wouldn’t do. Not for this conversation. “If you want me on your council, I will of course accept.”

The prince slumped in apparent relief, like there’d been any doubt about her answer. Which rather underscored her next words.

“But I don’t know how you expect me to give any honest opinion when you are holding my countrymen hostage for my behavior.”

“…So if I want you on my council, I should let them go?”

He’d stolen her ostrich-horse. This fully meant that he’d be paying all her wages in double, for the rest of his life.

“You must also accept one of our leaders to your council. One that we pick, not you.”

“Oh,” Zuko said. “That will probably solve the problem of them immediately renewing their rebellion, at least for awhile.” And he smiled at her, like the Dum-Dum she so often heard his sister call him behind closed doors. “Thank you, Councilor Song.”

…That was going to take some getting used to. The name, and the *smiling.*

“You understand, of course,” the Fire Princess said, as her tiny dragon continued bleeping around her very dignified neck, “that you’ll be paid in our gratitude.”

As that was how the Fire Nation always paid, Song did not reply.

“…We’re also giving you a salary,” Zuko said, turning a frown on his sister. His red hatchling took this moment of apparent inattention to finish wriggling free of its blanket prison. It bolted up his arm to a shoulder-perch, from which it chirped a scathing review of the world.

It’s sibling chirped back. It did not take its tail out of its mouth to do so.

“Let’s establish a royal income stream before we start making monetary promises, brother,” the Fire Princess said.

The red dragon fluttered its wings. Having met peacock-snake chicks, and their ability to fly as soon as they’d preened the sheaths off their primary feathers, Song was the only one prepared for the hatchling to *fly.*

All eyes tracked its first little leap-and-glide.

As hers was the nearest shoulder, the hatchling did not go far. It stomped a little claw-tipped circle around her collarbone, entirely pleased with itself, before settling down into its own little bleep necklace. It had the dignity to hug its tail instead of bite it, though.

Song was, as was her unfortunate habit upon meeting certain people in this room, entirely charmed.

“We’ll give you a salary… later?” the Fire Prince offered.

Song smiled. Song stroked the warm little ring of scales around her neck, with one light finger.

Song whispered to its little head, while the Fire siblings returned to their bickering, “I’m going to call you Ostrich-Horse.”

If they were gathering this adorable council of *differing opinions,* then Azula had her own pick to make.

“Lady Jun,” she said, as their next meeting concerning the repatriated northern prisoners came to an end. “A moment.”

She tapped the tip of her golden dragon’s tail. It blinked awake in her lap; another insistent tap had it raising its head, assessing the direction of Azula’s gaze, and hissing with suitable enthusiasm. Azula slipped it a bite of grasshopper-cow jerky.

“Please don’t train it to do that,” Zuko said.

“I’m merely honing its preexisting instincts,” she said.

A point he could not argue, given that his own hatchling had needed no training to defend his shoulder. Or the top of his head. Particularly from his ponytail, to which the creature took great and roll-kicking offense. It was training her brother to use a proper top knot again; clever creature.

…Her own would be just as clever. It was simply taking its time to evaluate the situation.

Meanwhile. The bounty hunter had paused in the doorway, narrowing her eyes.

“I think a promotion is in order,” Azula said. “Don’t you, brother? Lady Jun is working *so hard* for your people. How… noble.”

“Oh fuck you,” said the bounty hunter, catching on.

Which was exactly the attitude Azula wanted, in her own council picks. Father could have used a few less yes men, and a few more *fuck you* women.

The soon to be officially ennobled Lady Jun leveled a finger at the origin of her problems.

“I am never kidnapping you again,” she said.

When it came to trying to capture people, this made her a quicker study than Zuko.

Sokka, with his hair done up in a top knot, snuck around a corner in one of the mansion’s hallways. Sokka, wearing the servant’s uniform he’d swiped off the back lines, was… functionally indistinguishable from the newer staff hired to deal with all these fancy people who’d been arriving.

Sokka, three errands and one bitching session with the kitchen staff over the constant demands of the guests in the Wisteria room later, snuck *even harder* towards a certain room.

A certain, hard-to-schedule-officially room.

“…And then he… snuck away? Around the side of the building,” came a voice from behind the door. A voice Sokka could already picture with its stupidly perfect hair with its one strand out of place.

“Yeah,” said Toph, who was utterly exempt from the scheduling blackout, “he does that.”

“I just want to know why he left Appa under my window.”

Sokka paused to reassess. But the audible bison-snuffling outside meant his getaway hadn’t wandered off yet, and Toph was generally down for the least-legal option in any situation, with minimal to no prompting.

“Don’t worry about it,” Toph said. “Now come on, show me.”

“No.”

“Just a little grabbity-peak.”

“Why do you have to phrase it like— *No.”*

“Come on, I won’t even tell the others, it’ll be our little secret—”

“*No.”*

Which was when Sokka stealthily burst in on

Toph’s hands

All up in Zuko's robes.

The former Fire Lord was pressed up against the wall, his face all red, trying to hold said robes closed against this inexplicable assault.

"Toph," Sokka said, because he'd never had a teenage male friend before (and he was NOT starting now) but so help him if he wasn't a bro, *"hands off.* What are you even doing?"

"Trying to touch Zuko's dragon," Toph said.

"You said you wouldn't tell," said Zuko, which did not make this better.

Sokka took in a breath. And grabbed a grinning Toph by the back of her shirt collar. "Toph you are *twelve,* how do you even know about *'dragons'?*"

"Suki told me."

"Well we're going to go have a little *talk* with Suki about *draconic consent."*

Sokka. Less-than-stealthily dragged a tiny menace away.

…Zuko blinked after them. The bison continued eating the shrubbery below his window. Curled up in a warm little ball in his robes, just above his sash, Zuko's dragon continued its beauty nap.

(It was a point of pride among the palace staff, to have kept the secret of their dragons' hatching. There may or may not have been bets on which members of the colonial leadership would spit out their drinks on whom when they were revealed.)

“Hey, remember that unspecified favor?” Toph asked, after they’d been tossed out of the mansion for not actually being invited in there, or working there, and also causing a significant hallway commotion.

“…I would like to say that I do not,” said Sokka, but he was already recalling. They’d been newly landed in the Fire Nation, and no one had usurped anyone yet, and Toph had been creating certain nicknames for people who were definitely not friends and he’d begged her to stop—

—in exchange for one unspecified favor.

“No,” said Sokka, with great and belated foreboding.

“I’m cashing in,” she said. “No capturing Zuko without my permission.”

“That is not an equal exchange, Toph.”

“You have had months without my best nicknames. *Months.* I could have been calling him Feisty Fire, Field Trip Lord, Dragon Daddy—”

“Please never call him that again.”

“Do I get another favor?”

“No.”

The last of the colonial governors had arrived.

All of the colonial governors had arrived.

“Remember this,” Azula said, as they looked over the crowded ballroom. “This is what their loyalty looks like.”

Each had been appointed to their position by a Fire Lord; some by Azulon, most by Ozai. And while the position was not technically hereditary, he saw at least two whose families had first been granted the mandate to rule by Sozin himself.

They’d each been appointed by *a* Fire Lord. And if the current Fire Lord wished to take back those appointments, to shutter entire colonies— Well. They had other options, didn’t they?

Azula had declined liquor, on both their behalves. The servants had instead brought them tea, which neither of them had drunk. Azula pretended to, mostly as a prop piece.

“Go on, brother,” she whispered, as dinner and small talk were drawing to a close, and the time for speeches was beginning. “Pelt them with bread.”

“I don’t think they’d settle for crumbs,” he whispered back. Set his own still-full teacup down. Stood.

Silence spread outward from the head table.

“You know why you’re here,” he said, after a final deep breath. “And we know why we’re here. The North has repaired the fleet the Ocean struck down. The Earth Kingdom is run by generals who ignore our messengers. Fire Lord Iroh wishes the youngest colonies to begin packing their things away, and returning home. Where is home? What does that even mean?”

They murmured their agreement, like what was a serious question for him was a talking point for them.

“Governor Shohei has invited you here. I asked him to make certain things clear: that I am not starting a civil war. That if the colonies are ours, then we will start treating them like it. That you are getting both of us, or neither of us. That I did not bow to my uncle, and I will not bow to you.”

His dragon crawled up to his unadorned top knot; curled around it, wings mantling, eyes as golden as his own glaring out over the crowd. It hissed.

Azula’s golden dragon arched up from her neck, hissing in well-practiced chorus. His sister raised one finger and gave it a delicate scratch on the chin right below all those tiny teeth. Those who’d arrived early would know those teeth—and the lizards they were attached to—were already twice as big as they’d been at hatching. The royal dragons had gone from the size of garter-gophers to the size of ferret-boas in the course of a few days. One needn’t be able to calculate solar eclipses to extrapolate from there.

His sister did not stand. She did not need to, to be terrifying. “Your reply?”

One by one, with furtive glances amongst themselves, the assembled governors and colonial officials stood.

Once they were on their feet, there was only one place for loyal children of the Fire Nation to be: they knelt.

Team Avatar received three invitations to the coronation: one for Master Katara and all her people (“Why do *you* have people?” “Don’t be jealous, Sokka.”), one to Master Toph Beifong (“He wants to poach me so bad.” “…Toph please stay away from Zuko’s dragon”), and one to Appa.

“…Sitting on Appa isn’t Fire Nation soil,” Aang pointed out, which was the rest of their invitations.

And also one of the best views. They were in the square in front of the governor’s mansion. Even if they were parked to the back, Appa’s mobile balcony seating (read: saddle) meant they could see right to the front. Only the people hanging out of the surrounding windows could claim a better view. A platform had been earthbent up front for the occasion, and Sokka would wonder which earthbender they’d convinced to do *that* if there wasn’t a willing one lounging right on Appa’s legs below him. Both feet on the ground was the best view, for Toph.

There were, inexplicably, a bunch of Earth Kingdom citizens with that fresh-from-prison look Sokka was getting way too much experiencing spotting. They had seats of honor right up front with the colonial leaders, though someone had been wise enough to seat them on oppposite sides of the aisle. Katara’s so-called people had been invited up front, too, but Katara had Team Avatar solidarity, and so the rest of the Water Tribe group had put down blankets and furs on the ground around Appa. From above, maybe it would look like a whole fluffy herd, complete with riders.

…It would have been something, to see a whole bison herd with its riders. It was the only nation they were missing.

The rescued Fire Nation prisoners had set up next to—and intermingling with—the Water Tribe women. So had the Earth Kingdom smugglers, that his sister and Zuko had casually scooped up in their wake. Like personally helping the South’s last waterbender bring home a whole shipboard of tangible hope for the future *while* earning the undying loyalty of a large swath of the Fire Nation navy (and associated familial connections) *while* freeing a bunch of extremely shady but probably well-connected Earth Kingdom smugglers was just. A thing. One did.

Sokka would very much like for Zuko to stop being an evil mastermind now.

“Press coming through,” declared one of the biggest guys Sokka had ever seen, shoving his way (relatively delicately) through the crowd, a few decidedly more twiggy people bobbing along in his wake. Why did they *also* have the fresh-from-prison look. “Freed Press coming through.”

“I’m just saying,” Sokka said, “that it was a weird move, politically, to leave me out of the invitations. Why insult a guy like that when you don’t have to? It’s not like *I’m* the one with the crazy bending-stealing power, no offense Aang. Why would he… He still doesn’t know my name. Does he.”

“Who would have told him?” his dearest sister said, while Toph cackled below.

The ceremony was starting now. The governor guy gave a speech, like they didn’t already all know why they were all there. The leather-clad bounty hunter inexplicably got called on stage next, and Sokka honestly didn’t know what that was about because the ex-prisoners were cheering too hard. But Azula personally handed her a new hair accessory before she was allowed to stomp her way back down.

It was certainly the day for new hair accessories.

Zuko joined his sister up on the stage, and his own hair thingie was huge and red and gaudy and *moving.* So was Azula’s necklace, which Sokka would process in a moment, because right now he needed to address one very important issue:

“Zuko’s dragon,” he shouted, leaning out over the edge of the saddle. “Toph. *Zuko’s dragon.”*

“Sssh,” Toph said. “I want to hear if he starts any more civil wars.”

The coronation progressed. A lot like last time, but with less priceless artifacts from the royal treasury. They would not be crowned while in the light of the same brazier that had seen Fire Lord Suinin crowned, nor would Zuko kneel on the same beaded cushion that had seen Fire Lord Jingu’s ascension to her fifty-three year reign.

Azula stood beside him, ready to accept her demotion to princess, another sage mirroring for her all the actions they took with him. She looked composed; maybe bored. Maybe this was the part of the dream she was skipping.

He took a deep breath. Kept his eyes forward.

He'd told Iroh he wouldn't be prince again. Had sworn to himself that there'd be no more apologies; no more bowing.

He'd wanted to do his best, until he was dethroned. Wanted someone better to take his place.

Zuko didn't know what *better* was. Maybe no one did. (Or everyone thought they did, which was its own problem.)

He'd wanted to have a choice. This was his.

He let his breath out.

Zuko knelt before his people, and rose their prince. Beside him stood his sister. And behind them—

Behind them, Lady Huian and the other servants who had worked day and night to sew it in time had been granted the honor of unfurling their new flag.

A background of black. A two-tone flame of red and gold. And above it, two dragons of the same entwining together to form a crown.

The flag of the Fire Nation Principalities.

They weren't seceding from the Home Islands. They weren't starting a civil war, or breaking the peace he'd wanted to make. Zuko was merely taking the crown Iroh had always wanted to give him.

And if he was sharing with his sister, well. At least their generation knew *how* to share. He'd heard that was an important skill, for peace.

"…We should have captured him," said Sokka.

Nobody ever listened to Sokka.

End Book 1: Autumn (Unbowed) (These Aren't the Field Trips You're Looking For)

Chapter End Notes

Iroh: If you accept this crown I swear I will not dethrone you twice
Zuko, thirty-three chapters later: bet

And with that, we reach the end of our first narrative arc! And a whole-ass novel it turned out to be, so we are going to break there. Thank you to everyone who kudosed, commented, cheered, screamed, and/or wanted to shake Iroh (or your author) a little. As the second ever fanfic I started writing, and the first to take off in popularity, it's an incredible feeling to finally reach this point.

That said, there is definitely more to come in the series at large—now that we've Crowned That Boy™, it's time to squish our toes into the gooey political rammifications of... *gestures towards the previous 138k*

So please do subscribe either to the series or to me as a writer to get notified about the future launch of *Towards the Sun, Book 2: Winter (When the Days Are Shortest) (And you get an assassin, and you get an assassin, and you get—)*

End Notes

If you liked this, check out my other Avatar fics! ...There are significantly more if you're logged in, btw. Bad AI bots, no scraping.

Tumblr || Original Fiction: Fox's Tongue and Kirin's Bone || Fanart || TV Tropes: Towards the Sun

Works inspired by this one

Fanart for Towards The Sun by drasan_nah

Appa cares by Carolofthebell

[Restricted Work] by I_dlovetobeknowunknown

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